

**IS DIVINITY A GENDER ISSUE?
THE CASE OF THE MINOAN “GODDESS”**

By

Priscilla Field



**Masters Thesis in Archaeology
Department of Archaeology, Conservation and Historical Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oslo
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ABSTRACT

Ever since Arthur Evans discovered the delightfully elegant world of the Minoans, the numerous depictions of seemingly important women have been difficult to ignore. These women, however, are invariably considered to be goddesses, or at the very least, in service to a/the goddess. This study attempts to make a case for a number of these “goddesses” to be allowed entry into the secular world. Such prominent women should not automatically be relegated to the sacred sphere in time-honoured binary fashion where men hold power in a temporal capacity and women can only do likewise within a religious framework. Our cultural expectations, both present and inherited, should be suspended and the archaeological record itself be given the opportunity to speak for itself.

Chapter 1 outlines the plot, introduces the characters and sets the scene for enactment of the Minoan drama. The historical background forms the backdrop against which all future interpretations are played out. Chapter 2 endeavours to tease out the reasons for the original deification of a number of Minoan women and to assess how “gender-neutral” these assessments have been. Chapter 3 presents the myriad ways in which Bronze Age women in the Mediterranean participated in their communities. It also attempts to make a case for the influence and power Minoan women might have had: with particular reference to their links with saffron. Chapter 4 presents two case-studies: the “goddess” from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri and the “goddess” on the Mochlos ring. The denouement comes in Chapter 5.

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CHAPTER 1: THE PLOT, INTRODUCING THE CHARACTERS AND SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 Introduction: The Plot

The Minoan world appears to have been overflowing with goddesses, priestesses and to a lesser extent priests: the odd god rounds out the picture. The religious nature of Minoan society seems to have been bolstered by the disproportionately large number of depictions of important female figures and the corresponding lack of dominant males. The so-called lack of [male] ruler iconography seems to be puzzling: the women have been mainly identified as divinities. Goddesses appear to be less threatening than mortal women to modern sensibilities. “Demoting” women to the sacred sphere appears to neutralise their power.

Notwithstanding a current preoccupation with structure and agency, most theories/ theorists still seem to implicitly attribute the exercising of agency to males (Scott 1997, 6). As Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector point out, even language favours male engagement: passive verb forms are generally used for females reserving active forms for male (Conkey & Spector 1998, 20). The same principle can be seen in our religious terminology: the default for divinity often appears to be male. A brief foray into a few dictionaries was illuminating. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a goddess as “a female god” whilst a god is “a spirit or being believed to control some part of the universe or life and often worshipped for doing so”. A goddess in The Merriam Webster, like in the Cambridge Dictionary is “a female god” whilst a god, in addition to the usual supernatural definitions, is “a person or thing of supreme value” or “a powerful ruler”. Not only are these women shorn of any semblance of secular power, but to a monotheistic culture with a supreme male figure (there are no definitions for Goddess, with a capital “G”), their deification implicitly subordinates them: language reflects and at the same time reinforces our perceptions.

I began to search for dissent within the ranks: was it accepted unanimously that these eminent women were goddesses? The “goddess” depicted on the wall of Xeste 3 at Akrotiri drew my attention due to what seemed to be very consistent references to her divine status. However, it transpired that there were some (admittedly in the minority) who did not seem completely convinced: some instances of quotation marks placed around the word “goddess” (e.g. Laffineur 2000, 890-906) could be noted, as well as a few references to the “so-called goddess” (e.g. Televantou 2000, 831-843). This sparked my interest to try and discover what

the initial basis was for interpreting this woman's divine incarnation. If she was not as firmly ensconced in the heavenly realm as she generally was perceived to be, then the field could be opened up to further enquiry. Was it the case that, in the words of Colin Renfrew (1985, 20), when outlining the process through which the presence of religious ritual could be established, the fresco could "not be explicable in secular terms in the light of what we know of the society"? Could there be another explanation for her obviously high status?

Women on glyptic are also frequently immortalised. Scenes involving "goddesses" in boats attracted my interest. Why were these figures considered to be divine? A number of these crafts have been identified as "cult boats" due to their appearance as "fantastical in comparison with normal ship-building practices as evidenced by the corpus" (Wedde 1990, 14; Marinatos 1933, 223; Betts 1971, 325-334). However, there are different opinions over the identification of aspects which are considered abnormal. Even the sex of these figures is often unclear, although they are generally considered to be females. It occurred to me that maybe they were considered to be women due to the cultic appearance of the boats (as women seem to have become inextricably linked to religion) or else they really *were* perceived to be women and thus the boats seemed to assume more fantastical proportions in the eyes of the beholder. The boat on the Mochlos ring is occupied not only by a "goddess", but transports a tree above which "floats" a number of disputed objects. Although the boat is invariably considered to be cultic, a small element of uncertainty does exist. When it is referred to as "probably a cult vessel" (e.g. Morgan 1988, 134), the identification cannot be taken as a *fait accompli*. Could these generally considered divine attributes have earthly rather than heavenly connotations?

After the historical background has been laid and the "plot" established, this paper has been broadly divided into three, interconnected parts. In the first I will attempt to make a case for bringing goddesses in general (and some in particular) down to earth by endeavouring to get to the roots of the reasons for their original deification and establishing whether the criteria appear to have been applied in a gender-neutral manner. This section will also touch upon the ambiguous nature of many iconographic depictions and what this could imply for the overall interpretation of divine images. The second part will attempt to make associations between women and their possible occupations and follow this through to establish the existence of powerful females engaged in their Bronze Age *lifeworlds*: not just in the religious sphere, but as fully-participating members in the secular arena. The final section will take the so-called

“goddess” of Xeste 3 at Akrotiri and the “goddess” on the Mochlos ring” as case studies and offer alternative interpretations of their presence and attributes.

Martin Nilsson (1971, 6-7) claimed that scholars unanimously agreed that the “Minoan and the Mycenaean religions were identical in their outward forms. Practically, in the details of research, we must treat both as one”. Although this is no longer a commonly-held view, there is a tendency to conflate all Late Aegean iconography and artefacts in both time and place (Walberg 1988, 211). Thus, depictions on seals from LM II/III both on Crete and the Mainland are often used to help prove a point for the Minoan world. However, this might have been a very different culture. The archaeological record shows that Crete became subjected to increased Mycenaean influence from around 1490 BCE. After the destructions at the end of LM I, only a few sites were re-inhabited: Knossos was extensively rebuilt. Mycenaean pottery styles, methods of burial and their Linear B language appears in the archaeological record. It becomes well nigh impossible to differentiate between mainland and Cretan products (German 2005, 93; Olsen 1998, 381; Krzyszkowska 2005, 193). There are also indications that a shift in the balance in gender relations might have occurred. I shall follow the usual convention and refer to this period as “Mycenaean” and the term “Minoan world” to cover both Crete and Thera. Although there is some debate over how “Minoanised” Thera actually was, both islands exhibit many (some say overwhelming) signs of similarity, particularly when compared to the other Cycladic islands. This is evidenced in architecture, pottery, wall paintings, the weight system, loom weight types and the Linear A script (Palyvou 2005 16 & 179; Neimeier 1990).

1.2 Introducing the Characters

The characters in the story are set in the Neopalatial period, MM III-LM IB¹ (Fig. 1): that is the period directly preceding the Mycenaean “incursion”.

1.2.1 Akrotiri and the “Goddess” from Xeste 3

The first signs of a prehistoric civilization on Thera emerged during a French quarrying operation for volcanic ash to construct the Suez Canal towards the end of the 19th century. A few years later two French archaeologists, Mamet and Gorceix made a desultory foray around

¹ Ca. 1750-1490 BCE (according to the “new” high chronology). The traditional low chronology based mainly on cross-dating with other Mediterranean cultures, dates the start of the Neopalatial period to ca. 1600 BCE which places the Thera eruption in ca. 1500 BCE. However, new calibrated radiocarbon dates have moved the eruption further back to around 1628/6 BCE which also pushes the start of the Late Bronze Age back accordingly (Rehak & Younger, 1998, 98-99).

Modified High Minoan and Low Egyptian Chronology*

- 1750	-----		
N	<i>neopalatial palaces rise</i>		
E	MM III		
O	1750-1700		
- 1700	-----		13th Dynasty - 1759-1606
P			
A	LM IA		
L	1700-1580		
A			
T.	<i>Thera eruption ca. 1628</i>		15th (Hyksos) Dynasty
			1637-1529
- 1600	-----		17th Dynasty (Thebes)
			1606-1539

	LM IB		
	1580-1490		
-1500	-----		18th Dynasty - 1539-1296
	<i>-----Cretan destructions-----</i>		Ahmose I 1539-1514 <i>Hyksos expelled</i>
F	LM II		Amenhotep I 1514-1493 <i>Dab'a frescoes</i>
I	1490-1430		Tuthmosis I 1493-1481
N	<i>Mycenaean presence?</i>		Tuthmosis II 1481-1479
A			Hatshepsut 1479-1457
L			Tuthmosis III 1479-1425 <i>Keftiu tomb paintings</i>
	LM IIIA1		Amenhotep II 1427-1392
- 1400	1430-1370		
			Tuthmosis IV 1392-1382
P			Amenhotep III 1382-1344
A	LM IIIA2		
L	1370-1320		Akhenaten 1352-1336
A			Smenkhkare 1338-36; Tutankhamen 1336-27
T.			Ay 1327-1323
	<i>Knossos final destruction</i>		Horemheb 1323-1295 <i>Uluburun wreck ca. 1316</i>
- 1300	early		19th Dynasty - 1295-1186
	<i>palatial administration ends</i>		Ramses I 1295-1294; Seti I 1294-1279
			Ramses II 1279-1213
	LM IIIB		
O	1320-1200		Merenptah 1213-1203 <i>Libyans attack Delta</i>
S			Amenmesses 1203-1200
T	late		Seti II, Siptah, Tewosret 1200-1186
- 1200	-----		20th Dynasty - 1186-1069
P	early		Setnakht 1186-1184
A			Ramses III 1184-1153 <i>Sea Peoples</i>
L	LM IIIC		
A	1200-1100		Ramses IV - VI 1153-1136
T.	late		Ramses VII 1136-29; Ramses VIII 1129-26
			Ramses IX 1126-1108
- 1100	-----		Ramses X 1108-1099
	Subminoan		Ramses XI 1099-1070/69
	(transition to Iron Age)		
	1100-1000/975		

* Revised Aegean high chronology based on S.W. Manning, *The Absolute Chronology of the Aegean Early Bronze Age* (Sheffield 1995); Egyptian low chronology based on K. Kitchen, "The Basics of Egyptian Chronology in Relation to the Bronze Age Aegean," in P. Aström ed., *High, Middle, or Low? Acts of an International Colloquium on Absolute Chronology Held at the University of Gothenburg 20th–22nd August 1987*, pt. I (Göteborg 1987) 37–55.

Fig. 1: Chronological Table

the area, including Akrotiri, to be shortly succeeded by the Germans. However, it wasn't until 1966 that Spyridon Marinatos, aided by information gleaned in the earlier surveys, began to dig in earnest at the site of Akrotiri. An extraordinarily well-preserved Bronze Age town was revealed which had been destroyed by a volcanic eruption in the middle of the second millennium BCE. The excavated town appears to have been the result of a large-scale rebuilding plan following an earthquake which had levelled the site 50 years previously. This gives most of the remains a *terminus post quem* at the start of LM IA and a *terminus ante quem* of around ca.1628 BCE (if the "high" chronology is accepted). Marinatos continued excavating until his death in 1974. Digging was resumed by Alexander Dumas in 1976 and proceeds slowly but surely to the present day (Palyvou 2005, xxiv-xxv, 9-10 & 177-188).

The "goddess" from Xeste 3 came to light in the mid-1970s. Marinatos (1976, 22 & 33) was immediately struck by her demeanour. She "might represent a 'goddess' or at least a 'queen'". However,

it was his daughter, Nanno Marinatos, who, in her seminal book of 1984, laid the framework for all future analyses of these frescoes. She identified seven buildings at Akrotiri as shrines, including Xeste 3 and concludes that this building was the site of initiation rituals.

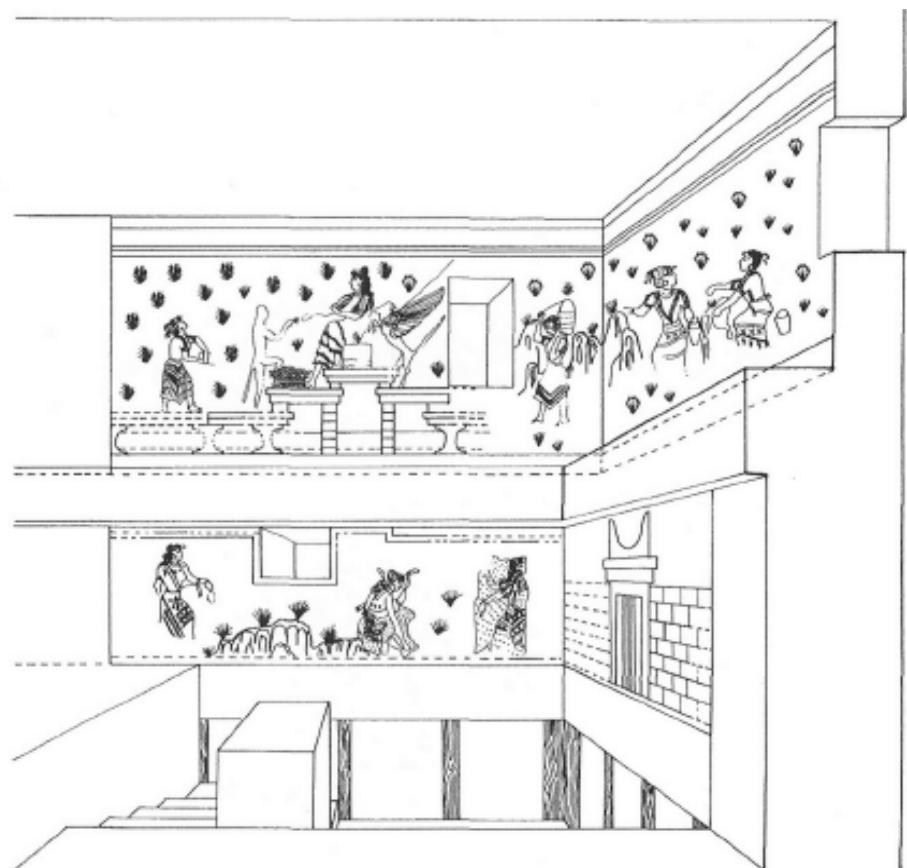


Fig. 2 The "Goddess" and Her Companions in Xeste 3

Wall paintings

decorate two levels

of room 3 of the Xeste 3 building (Fig. 2). On the ground floor, access was controlled by pier-and-door partitions both to the room itself and from the section of the room which contained a "lustral basin". On one of the walls immediately above the "lustral basin" three girls are

shown in a rocky landscape interspersed with crocuses and on the other wall is depicted an architectural structure, topped by horns of consecration. On the floor directly above, seated on a three-tiered platform, is an elaborately adorned female, our “goddess” (Fig. 3), being offered saffron stigmas by a blue monkey and flanked on the other side by a griffin. Four



Fig. 3: The “Goddess” in all her Glory

other females are featured in various stages of saffron gathering. At least four male figures, on a blank background, are featured on the west wall on the ground floor. On the upper floor on the south wall are three mature females (Marinatos 1984, 61-65; 1993, 203-208).

Marinatos (1984, 61-72) argues that the frescoes on the ground floor depict an initiation rite conducted within the framework of a vegetation festival celebrating the goddess of nature in general and fertility in particular. She sees references throughout the frescoes to abundance and fecundity and further notes that the girls exhibit different stages of bodily development: these transitional stages being supported by their hairstyles². Whilst acknowledging that saffron must have been a valuable commodity, she nonetheless believes that the symbolism of the crocus flower lies rather within the realm of spring and rebirth.

² See Davis, 1986, 399-406 for a detailed analysis of hairstyles and their relationship to age.

Thus, the “goddess” on the upper floor is presiding over her fertile realm. Her interpretation is widely accepted today (Palyvou 2005, 57).

1.2.2 Mochlos and the Mochlos Ring

Mochlos is now a small island off the north coast of Crete, but it was almost certainly connected to the mainland by a narrow isthmus during the Bronze Age. R. B. Seager began excavations in 1908. Costis Davaras and Jeffrey Soles took up where Seager left off in 1971 and have continued intermittently through to the present. The island was extensively occupied throughout the Bronze Age. The archaeological evidence includes sizable remains of a LM IB settlement (Soles 1997).

The gold ring, commonly called the “Mochlos ring” (Fig. 4), which was unfortunately lost in the early years of the 20th century, was found in grave IX on Mochlos and is dated to LM IB (Cain, 2001, 35). It depicts a [female] figure sitting in a boat with one end shaped like a backward facing animal head. But there are differing opinions as to the nature of the beast. It



Fig. 4: The Mochlos Ring.

was originally described by Seager (1912, 90) and Evans (1935, 952) as a dog’s head, although Evans later changed his mind and decided it was the head of a hippocampus (sea-horse). This opinion was shared by Axel Persson (1942, 83). However,

later scholars have identified it as a Babylonian dragon’s head (Younger 1988, 143) or a sea-monster (Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 152). Behind the figure is a stepped platform out of which sprouts a tree (there is some debate as to whether it is onboard or on the shore). There seems to be some form of architectural structure placed on the shore facing the lady onboard. Three objects “float” above and to the side of the boat, each of which have been interpreted in widely divergent ways. They have been identified respectively (from left to right in Fig. 4) as: object i) omphaloi/squills, a figure-of-eight shield, orbs with flames or twigs and pithoi; object ii) a chrysalis, a “sacred heart”, a poorly executed figure-of-eight shield and “almost

anything”; and object iii) Linear A sign *171(?), a quadruple axe and a pillar-shaped object (Seager 1912, 90; Nilsson 1971, 350; Younger 1988, 143 & 1995, 172; Marinatos 1993, 163-164; Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 149-158).

However, the general consensus seems to be that the scene depicts a goddess onboard a “divine boat” analogous with Egyptian and Near Eastern versions which often have prows formed like animal heads (e.g. Marinatos 1933, 223-227; Marinatos 1989, 132 n. 22; Evans 1908, 195-196, 1928, 250 & 1935, 952; Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 149-158). Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1989, 97 & 1973, 907-100) believes that it represents a Minoan adaptation of the double-headed serpent boat depicted in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. As snakes had a specific religious connotation unique to the Minoans which made them unsuitable for the Mochlos boat, they replaced it with a sea-horse which it could easily be argued was the marine form of land-based horse transportation. She concludes that the ring shows “a goddess arriving at, or departing from, a sanctuary where she is going to assist, or has just assisted, at the performance of the ritual”. Marinatos (1993, 163-164) sees a goddess transporting a tree which will be placed on top of the shrine on her arrival. As can be seen from the last two examples it is not clear whether the boat is arriving or departing: some scholars are certain as to its direction (e.g. Marinatos 1993, 163-164; Persson 1942, 84; Seager 1912, 90) whilst others (e.g. Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, 98) are more cautious. It should also be pointed out that doubts as to the sex of the boat’s occupant were raised by her discoverer, Seager. Although he personally believed it to be female, this seemed to be rather due to the fact that male deities seemed to have been in “...a very secondary position in the Minoan pantheon, and it is not likely that here he should have been made not merely the principal but the only figure in a scene of evidently religious significance” (Seager 1912, 90).

1.3 Setting the Scene: History of Research

If an attempt is made to knock a goddess or two off their perches, in the interests of justice, a thorough investigation needs to be carried out. The background which led to their deification in the first instance has to be looked at to try and ascertain what theoretical and historical undercurrents spawned these initial interpretations. Arthur Evans is, of course, a key figure whose influence cannot be trivialised. His milieu laid the foundation for many a subsequent theory and still influences research today. As new theoretical paradigms have appeared in the decades following Evans, new avenues of research are opened up and old ones are adapted to

suit the changing climate: religious interpretations in their various guises move in and out of favour.

1.3.1 Evans and his Legacy

“...when men wrote and thought and built and women wore shady hats and crinolines....”³

Since Sir Arthur Evans began his excavations at Knossos at the beginning of the 20th century much has been written about his still pervading influence on Minoan studies: how he shaped a hitherto unknown culture not only in the image of his own era’s concepts of society and empire, but also by his desire to have found a beautiful, artistic and peaceful utopia. His Minoans were, like himself and his target audience, “educated, wealthy, male, powerful and cultured” (McEnroe 2002, 69). Although he was very aware of the prominent role of women, suggested by the wall paintings and seals, he was too much a man of his time to entertain the idea that the reins of temporal power could be placed in feminine hands. Thus, women were allowed high status within the religious sphere (either as goddesses or priestesses) and the “priest-king” was born out of a rather suspect restoration of a very fragmentary fresco (Dougherty 2004, 196; Koehl 1995, 24). Since Evans, Minoan figural art has remained within the framework of religion. The scenes are related to goddess worship, processions of gift bearers, bull-leapers, grapplers etc. and other miscellaneous “sacred festivals”. This is in contrast to Mycenaean art which is commonly viewed as more warlike and secular: depictions of warriors in combat and men hunting abound (Cain 1997, 11-12; Immewahr 1990, 109)

The restored architecture and artwork, and their uncanny resemblance to the Art Nouveau and Art Deco style prevalent in Evans’ time, has inspired comments such as those of Chester Starr: “Minoan civilisation is the only great civilization created in the twentieth century”. Evans’ sister, Joan, bolsters this impression when she writes that it was fortunate that his newly-discovered world was exactly to his taste and was thus tailor-made for him to retreat from a present in which he did not belong (Papadopoulos 2005, 88, 91, 102). His Minoans were as much a product of his *dasein* and fertile imagination as they were of his unquestionable skill and eye for detail (Hitchcock & Koudounaris 2002, 41). He was so much a part of and in tune with his newly discovered world that he seemed to have an almost mystical connection with it. During an illness, one night he recollects looking down the

³ Gordon, Mona (1924): an article on the discovery of Minoan Crete. In *The Times*, 6 December (from Papadopolous 2005, 125)

Grand Staircase and “seeing” “the Priest-King with his plumed lily crown, great ladies, tightly girdled, flounced and corseted, long-stole priests, and, after them, a retinue of elegant but sinewy youths” (Evans 1930, 301; Papadopoulos 2005, 101).

The world of Arthur Evans lingers on. In the same way as his interpretation of the culture as one permeated by religion so too does his view of Minoan society as being pure and unique still form much of the basis for any discussion of Minoans today, in spite of its location at the hub of an interconnected hub for trade and exchange. (Dougherty 2004, 196-197). However, even though Evans was the author of the original Minoan paradigm, their world has been peopled and re-peopled over the years by others who were/are equally products of their *lifeworlds*. During the 1970s and 1980s palaces became distribution centres populated with “compassionate elites with amazing managerial powers and a spirit of public duty, specialist farmers with an amazing understanding of formalist microeconomics”. During the 1990s structure and agency, semiotics and gender were added to the mix. However, Yannis Hamilakis points out that these important new insights, even when using the new buzz words of embodiment and corporeality, are still operating a Cartesian duality, and are not fully engaging with the phenomenological reality of the body’s sensory engagement with the world (Hamilakis 2002, 122).

Evans and Nilsson laid the foundation of Minoan religion. A brief synopsis would include their belief in the existence of: i) the Minoan Goddess (worshipped under a variety of aspects); ii) a minor male deity; iii) sacred symbols such as the double-axe and horns of consecration; iv) symbolic animals: chiefly the bull – probably in connection with sacrifice and associated with the double-axe, whilst birds symbolise the goddess; v) supernatural, hybrid animals (particularly the griffin) used in iconography; vi) rituals such as processions, dances, sacrifices and libations; and vii) a religion of nature and fertility. These tenets still form the “bible” of studies of Minoan religion today (Peatfield 1995, 218). This early recognition of the Great Goddess and her associated attributes and sphere of influence has continued to shape our perceptions of not just Minoan religion, but also of gender.

1.3.2 The Great Goddess

Evans’ “Great Minoan Goddess” was compatible with the nineteenth century male view of women as “a primitive, natural, sexual, maternal being, utterly divorced from their ‘rational’ male world”. Notwithstanding these origins and fuelled by the existence of many Palaeolithic,

Neolithic and Bronze Age female figurines discovered throughout Europe, including Crete, a number of archaeologists and feminists (notably Marija Gimbutas) have embraced the idea (Alberti 2002, 100; Dougherty 2004, 199; Goodison & Morris, 1998 13; 1998(a) 114). As tempting as it is to place the reins of divine power in the hands of a universal goddess – it risks locking women into a static role based on their reproductive capabilities, thereby relegating them to cultural objects rather than cultural agents (Talalay 1994, 172-173). In addition, it imputes a universal role and meaning to figurines which are not only very different but are widely scattered throughout space and time (Meskell 1995, 77).

In Crete there are few signs of a nurturing “Great Goddess” “whose biology is her destiny” (Goodison & Morris 1998, 21): images of women with young children are visibly lacking (Olsen 1998, 388). It has also been pointed out that starting with Evans, Minoan society, with its female-dominated iconography, seems to have been anomalous in the Bronze Age (Koehl 1995, 25-26; Waterhouse 1974, 153-155).

1.3.3 Cherchez la femme

Since the advent of New Archaeology the focus of Aegean research has concentrated on large scale processes (rather than the small scale agent) such as state formation, functions of the palaces and whether or not there really was a Minoan thalassocracy: this largely de-peopled world exists against the backdrop of ceramic periods. Archaeologists studying Minoans and Mycenaeans generally apply methods employed by classical archaeologists. This places more emphasis on pottery, chronologies and typologies than on gender studies (German 2000, 96; Manning 2001, 312). As S. Dyson rather caustically puts it, classical archaeologists are trained as “cautious positivists whose greatest fear in life is making some unsubstantiated statement which will be refuted by the next potsherd produced in trench 1A and will then expose them to profession ridicule and humiliation” (Dougherty 2004, 198). Lauren Talalay (1994, 174) claims that at the time of her writing, Aegeanists had generally side-stepped the gender issue. However, from the mid-1990s there has been a surge of interest in gender, symbolism and critical theory (for example Nikolaidou 2002; Manning 2001, 314-315; Alberti 2002; Kopaka 1997; Rehak & Younger 1998 (Nikolaidou 2002, 75). This would seem to be in-spite of rather than due to the data available for use in reconstructing Minoan society. This lack was noticed and bemoaned by Sheena Crawford (1983, 52) in the 1980s when she called for a methodic recording of the distribution of artefacts on a site and “preferably sexed (on physiological, *not* artefactual, grounds) burials”. However, it is debatable how much the

data base has changed since then, so it is possibly due to more untraditional approaches (from outside the field of Aegean research) to material culture such as works by Shanks and Tilley and a renewed emphasis on the individual agent, that less generalising and normative studies are emerging (Bennet 2002, 218).

The sex/gender dichotomy was used as a heuristic device by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s: sex became an established biological fact whilst gender was a culturally-imposed identity. Although this freed gender from biological determinism, it has also created a schism between the mind and the body, leaving the body under-theorised (Thomas 2002, 32-33). This split has been criticised, notably by Thomas Laqueur and Judith Butler. Laqueur (1990, 28-29) argues that a binary, biological difference between the sexes is a relatively recent construction. He points out that Aristotle seemed remarkably uninterested (compared to our current obsession with sex and sexuality) in what we would take to be the prime physical facts of sexual difference such as males having a penis and testicles and females a vagina, ovaries and a womb. To Aristotle *gender* was fixed with obvious attributes (women = passive, man = active) whilst biological sex characteristics were “contingent and philosophically not very interesting observations about particular species under certain conditions”.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1943, 16) pointed out that “the little rift between the sexes is astonishingly widened by simply teaching one set of catchwords to the girls and another to the boys”. Almost a century later, Butler (1993, 6) in a similar vein, claims that there can be no pre-social body which is not dependent for its existence upon discourse. Thus, there can be no idea of a pristine body without reference to another cultural understanding of this body. She does not mean that the body is constructed in language, but that it is instrumental in revealing it, as life is acted out through performances which through repetition produce gendered identities. Whilst not denying biological differences, she does question the way these differences are uncritically perceived as crucial in preserving a binary, sexual dichotomy and the way predicating gender on a pre-social sex, hides the recursive nature of the sex/gender relationship. Also, such distinctions are fluid. If, for example, the ability to bear children is taken as a central difference between the sexes, then this capability is only during a certain section of a given life-span thus sidelining children and menopausal/infertile women. In other words, sex is always already gendered (Alberti 2005, 108-111; Butler 1993, 6; Sørensen 2004, 55; Thomas 2004, 143).

Nordbladh and Yates were the first within archaeology to question binary biological sex. Like Butler, they claim that sex is also culturally categorised and variable within each individual life course. Rather than two clear-cut sexes, all the varying combinations, from sexual behaviour to chromosomal anomalies, should rather be seen as a spectrum. But this seems to be confusing two different concepts: biology and how culture regards and reacts towards noticeable differences. It can still be acknowledged that the idea of sex is culturally constructed without removing observable differences between males and females to an inaccessible theoretical plane. It would also seem to be significant that societies generally acknowledge some form of male/female division (Sørensen 2004, 46-51; Sofaer 2006, 96): whether or not we term it sex or gender and whether or not it is given the same emphasis as today.

In the 1920s, historian Gustav Glotz was caught on the horns of a Minoan dilemma: how to reconcile his Victorian sensibilities which dictated that women belonged at home with the rather contradictory images of Minoan women doing the opposite. This resulted in what would appear to be some rather contradictory statements. Whilst he had to admit that women must have had high status in society he still felt the need to proclaim that “doubtless their ordinary occupations kept women at home. They spent most of their time in sitting on low benches [men had high benches] and spinning wool in the Room of the Distaffs, or in taking air in a small courtyard” (Dougherty 2004, 198-199). The legacy of this enforced binary dichotomy between the sexes is by no means dead. Nanno Marinatos (1995, 578 & 582), for example, reinforces it when, based on her interpretation of Minoan art, she concludes that man was the essentially archetypal hunter and warrior and woman the nurturer and mother (Alberti 2002, 101). The latter has, however, been refuted by Barbara Olsen, Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (see Chapter 1.3.2 above).

1.4 Minoan Frescoes and Glyptic: Theoretical Approaches and Problems with Interpretation

The supposedly purely aesthetic impact of art on the eye of the beholder, as exemplified by Evans is very rarely subscribed to today. The past few decades have been used to classify and order corpus of artworks in a more systematic way, which although necessary and extremely useful for any studies of the material has resulted in the imposition of opposing binary categories which inevitably polarise the sexes (Alberti 2001, 192). Focus has recently shifted

within archaeology from emphasis on the body as a scene of display to looking at the effects of adornment and dress on the experience of the person whose body is literally shaped by it. The former has its roots in Michel Foucault's analyses of the body whilst the latter is based on Butler's notion of the repetitive performance giving physical characteristics social meaning. When applied to representational media it should be borne in mind that art/images are not simply "reflections of existing concepts of embodiment, but as part of the material apparatus through which such concepts were naturalized" (Joyce 2005, 144-147, 151). Art and objects do not just passively reflect ideas and messages, but react back on the practices that instigated them and can influence gender relations and attitudes connected to the "manipulation and sensory perception of particular forms". They are also part of a network of objects in which relationships are formed which affect their significance (Alberti 2001, 194).

Scholars trying to understand Minoan iconography do not have the Egyptian or Near Eastern texts and inscriptions to aid them. Interpretations are tentative and a number of questions have to be asked. Do the scenes depict their time of creation or the remote past? Was their content dictated by a patron or was some artistic licence granted to the creator? Are certain arrangements and associations symbolic? What kind of themes were considered suited or suitable for glyptic and frescoes, or other mediums (Tamvaki 1989, 272-273)? It is also fundamental to most interpretations that the majority of depictions in Minoan art are religious. In addition, or perhaps stemming from, this preoccupation with religion, scenes from everyday life appear to be lacking. Even if a case can be made for removing at least some of these representations from the religious sphere, it is still difficult to view many of them as showing mundane day-to-day activities. Any form of intimate interaction - between the people shown is generally non-existent, which is in marked contrast to other contemporary eastern Mediterranean cultures (Rehak 2002, 35)⁴.

It is problematic that frescoes are generally found in what are most likely to have been upper class houses. How applicable their imagery is to the average citizen is thus open to debate (Dougherty 2004, 203). In addition, most Aegean Bronze Age frescoes are fragmentary, in a poor state of physical preservation, from uncertain stratigraphical contexts, unknown architectural placements and have been subjected to dubious, not to say fanciful restorations.

⁴ However, there are a handful of seals spanning the entire Bronze Age, which *do* depict females and males together with explicit or implied sexual connotations. It is interesting to note that in all cases, the female is clearly the dominant partner (see Chapter 2.2.2 below) (Koehl 2001, 239-249).

However, the frescoes discovered at Akrotiri do not suffer to the same degree from these problems (except that the nature of the houses in which they are found *is* uncertain). Many are nearly complete, were found in situ and have well-dated stratigraphical contexts (Cameron 1979, 579). However, they are of course still fraught with the usual problems of interpretation. For example, traditionally, sex is allocated by transferring the colour convention of Egyptian art over to Minoan paintings. Therefore white skin is seen to depict a female and brown a male. When colour is lacking as is the case on seals, the presence of breasts is taken to mean female and lack thereof to indicate male: the male body is thus the default against which all bodies are measured. However, whichever method is used, they all are based on the notion of a coherent and polarized gender. This Benjamin Alberti (2002, 102-115) seeks to remedy in his recent analysis of the bull-leaping frescoes at Knossos, by positing a more fluid attitude towards gender.

Images on seals give rise to a particular set of problems over and above the usual interpretation issues. Many ambiguities are caused by: i) the seal engraver e.g. a mistake is rectified or a pun is intended; ii) different emphases and spacing accorded to the drawing during the recording process; iii) the disintegration of the image; iv) abbreviation of an item or structure to a degree which the artist considers would still render them intelligible to the viewer; v) limited surface area and tonal change resulting in conventions such as size to portray distance, overlapping of form and cutting to invoke light and shade: vi) the small size not allowing temporal development or an orderly connection between motifs; and vii) the merging of two forms e.g. a cat attacking a bird. On a coloured surface the two can be distinguished, but on a seal they have to be kept separate so as not to meld into each other. This creates a different action, more open to interpretation (Morgan 1989, 146-152).

Ingo Pini (1992, 11-14) acknowledges these issues and adds to the category of woes. Photographs of seal impressions are often poor and drawings incorrect and without recourse to the original impression (which is the case for most scholars) understanding these representations is extremely difficult. He also stresses the subjectivity of interpretations: how motifs are “identified primarily on the basis of personal belief, not on convincing parallels” and points out that unfortunately a number of depictions have been published with differing descriptions. He lists several examples, amongst them being the “Saffron Gatherer” fresco from Knossos, which was originally seen as a “blue boy”, but was subsequently re-categorised as a monkey. He also mentions the gold ring from Vapheio (CMS I 219), where

many of the elements have been identified in completely different ways. On this ring, what is commonly said to be a “sacral knot” is in the opinion of both Evans and Pini, a small female figure. Such issues should lead to more queries and question marks being attached to subjective interpretations.

CHAPTER 2: HOW DIVINE!? THE EVIDENCE...AND REBUTTAL

Identifying a divinity based on pictorial images alone is predicated on a myriad of preconceptions and misconceptions. The allocation of attributes considered to be part of an immortal being's nature is a matter of interpretation based on what the viewer either deems to be fitting based on their own *lifeworld*, or by analogy.

2.1 *Consensus gentium* and the *intersubjective* Field

"That which is universal among men carries the weight of truth" (Ferm 1965, 64)

Bourdieu's (1977, 79 & 1992, 56) theory of practice is based on the premise that actions are determined by *habitus* and *habitus* is passed on by a process over which the individual has "no conscious mastery". This process continues to reproduce itself, unless the protagonist experiences a change in social class or status which calls for another course of action (Throop & Murphy 2002, 186-187; Dornan 2002, 305-306). However, his approach implies a somewhat limiting view of human agency. On the other hand, Anthony Giddens' (1984, 118 & 376) structuration theory, although in many ways similar to Bourdieu's theory of practice, allows more scope for individual agency with his concept of the co-dependent duality inherent in the relationship between structure and agency. Social structure is formed by small intentional acts building on small acts and the authors of these acts *interact* with their surroundings within an embodied context. In his words, structure is "both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems" (Sewell 1992, 4). These dual functions of structure and agency are relevant to the cultural expectations the researcher is steeped in and in turn helps to reproduce.

Awareness of this process needs to be maintained when interpreting Minoan art and artefacts: how we are influenced by our *lifeworlds* and how this affects our impressions. This can be illustrated by an analogy of a drinking glass. We see it as a drinking glass because our worldly experience of it: we know it holds liquids which can quench our experience of thirst; it often appears in this context (on a table for example) and is made in this particular shape of this particular substance. We recognise it as it is embedded in the same background and *lifeworld* as we are: it does not exist as a given, but has to be created (Thomas 2004, 186-187). The object presents itself within a materialisation of senses and accumulated cultural knowledge: all of which need to be considered in any attempt to approach the material remains of the past.

The pre-knowledge contained in our *lifeworlds* could be said to be self-constructed to the extent that we are agents interpreting and accumulating experience and knowledge throughout our life times. This knowledge is imparted to succeeding generations: not necessarily only by active instruction but by the *intersubjective* field it forms over time. According to Charles Taylor these experiences are formed by self-interpretations: we sort out our feelings by undertaking “strong evaluations”. This involves ranking our interpretations according to that which is really important within the existing collective field of meanings – or *intersubjective* field. This *intersubjective* field is not just formed within the minds of a society, but is embedded in *praxis*. Neither do actions or *praxis* just consist of individual actions, but they are “essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action” (Taylor 1985, 36-49 & 1988 65-69). Sex/gender has been (and still is) afforded varying rankings by different scholars. In fact, up until relatively recently, the “collective field of meanings” has meant that such issues have been barely ranked at all. Deities (especially females), on the other hand, seem to have acquired the reputation of being divorced from real influence and power. These aspects have been reinforcing each other and influencing the questions posed.

Minoan men seem less likely to be unequivocally deified than women, but as the majority of people portrayed in important positions are women, there are fewer men to elevate. This lack of pictorial representation of men means that there are few guidelines enabling distinctions to be drawn between mortals and immortals, ruler and non-ruler (Koehl 1995, 24). It is also difficult to unravel how researchers might have reacted if cultural expectations of the sexual divide had been different. If we assumed that women were “on top”, Minoan art would have been very easy to understand.

Linear B refers to a male *wanax*⁵. This has led people to look for him in the archaeological record belonging to this time period. Having a concrete reference to a male in charge reinforced the natural order of things. There was no need to go hunting for divinities to the same extent as was felt necessary for the Minoans. Alan Peatfield (2001, 54) points out that “if you assume that religion is primarily about gods, then you are forced to go looking for them”. It is also true that if you are not looking for gods then you are less likely to be confronted by one. Mycenaean art is noted for its warlike characteristics: “the full

⁵ The term *wanax* (mentioned at both Pylos and Knossos) is an archaic form of *basileus* (king) (Rutter 2000).

exploitation of themes of warfare and hunting seems to have been specifically a mainland phenomenon whose roots can be traced back into the Shaft Grave era on the carved stone stelae, gold signet rings and inlaid daggers” (Immewahr 1990, 109 & 122). Wall paintings from Mycenae, Pylos, Tiryns and Orchomenos all show warriors and hunting scenes which confirm the Linear B references to inventories of weaponry (Cain 1997, 12-13). However, although the idea of peaceful Minoans and warlike Mycenaeans has recently come under attack (e.g. Dimopoulou 1999, 29; Krzyszkowska 2005, 139) this preconception has formed our expectations. Perhaps it is for this reason, the Mycenaean world is commonly considered to be more secular: it appears more male-oriented. It is interesting to speculate over what would have been the case if mainly women had been shown engaged in these warlike pursuits. Presumably this would have meant that the Mycenaeans were as preoccupied with religious activities as the Minoans: such actions could only have been “female-friendly” within the ritual field.

2.2 Ambiguity

The Minoan view on what was sacred and what was profane, what was reality and what was not, which characteristics were considered female and which were considered male, seems to have been somewhat ambivalent and was likely very different from our own. Their visual expression portrays a puzzling mix of elements which often forces the depicted scenes into the supernatural realms, or in the case of gender, compels the beholder to come up with scenarios which would account for the ambiguity or behaviour “inappropriate” for a certain sex. Art is generally regarded as laden with symbols due to the fact that artistic expression is not functional in the same way as a tool: it is a mental exercise rather than a physical, bodily engagement with the world. Thus, when things which we “know” are not real are portrayed, they are considered to be clearly symbolic. This reinforces the Cartesian divide between mind and body. However, Minoan art might reflect their essential “being-in-the-world”, without the modern dichotomy between nature and culture (Ingold 2000, 111-131; Herva 2006, 228).

2.2.1 Religion, Ritual and Reality

What is understood by the word “religion” is culturally-relative. The Egyptians had no equivalent term. It is “really a subdivision of a mode of perception which we all possess and is devoted to ‘otherness’”. If the otherness which is brought to the forefront of our minds is religion, then the space which is having this effect becomes a shrine or temple” (Kemp 2000,

491-523). The typical western world's focus on ontological dualism which divides the world into sacred and profane and humans from their inanimate/non-human co-inhabitants by no means reigns supreme even within contemporary societies: they can be (and are) seen as an interconnected whole. Agency is not the sole preserve of the human protagonist. As Bjørnar Olsen observes: "unaware of their ontological blunders the Sámi reindeer herders of northern Scandinavia hugged and greeted the pine tree on their return from the mountains" and "treated the brown bear as a relative" (Olsen 2003, 95). This holistic approach manifests itself in material culture and unifies the world in a cycle of give and take which includes all forms of life. This world is in constant flux and is always "on the verge of the actual" (Ingold 2000 111-131).

Although it is commonly accepted that Minoan religion must have contained some animistic and shamanic aspects, this seems to be tacitly understood to mean that they believed in spirits and indulged in ecstatic rituals such as "tree shaking". However, in light of the numerous depictions of Minoans interacting with inanimate objects such as stones and trees, it could be that the Minoans viewed their *lifeworld*, as being inhabited by potentially sentient beings, some of which were more human in shape and behaviour than others. But these entities did not necessarily belong to the supernatural realm – nor did they have to be substitutes for or inhabited by a third party. They were in essence not very different from themselves: an integral part of their environment. With this approach, "a griffin in a given scene does not indicate that the scene constitutes evidence of 'religion': that is, a specific category of action and thought separable from the ordinary interests of the everyday world" (Herva 2006, 232-234 & 2006a, 591-593). This lessens the likelihood of such "fantastic" creatures being used as indicators of immortal beings. Not only might griffins have been part of an interconnected earthly presence, but divinity *per se*, might also have been viewed in a different way: a less clear-cut distinction made between "them" and "us".

On a less esoteric plane, just because we do not believe in the existence of griffins, does not necessarily mean that the Minoans did not. Throughout antiquity it was thought that the griffin did exist in a far away country, somewhere on the cusp of reality and mythology. Mosaics from Piazza Armerina dating to the 4th century CE show a griffin being brought to the Circus in a cage alongside other "real" animals. A griffin is also depicted being captured in a hunting scene. So although no-one had ever seen one, they were still believed to be out there. Reality and imagination cannot be separated and the griffin is a symbol of power, not

necessarily of the divine variety (Hiller 2000, 916; Torelli 2000, 916). There are also three pictorial examples of griffins feeding their offspring: no other monster is depicted in such a mundane activity. This could also indicate that they were possibly considered real by the Minoans; only they were never seen (Younger 1995, 505). This idea is also considered by Lydia Morgan (1988, 160). In her analysis of the West House frescoes she notices that the plants depicted on the landscape painting on the East Wall mix cultivated and wild varieties showing that this is a man-made setting. It is here that the griffin – which, as she points out, might easily have been real in the minds of the beholders – is placed: in a recognisable, yet still exotic environment.

Our rational, Western minds do not allow non-humans personhood, thus such behaviour as tree shaking and fantastic familiars can only be seen in the light of symbolic, ritual and religious practices in the service of a supernatural power. However, hybrids, whether they be animal, vegetable or mineral might be a manifestation of the fluid nature and uncertainty of the world's inhabitants. This could account for the abundance of natural or landscape features in Minoan art, as well as the lack of clearly identified divine beings (Herva 2006, 232-234). This mixture of the real and surreal is echoed in plant depictions generally: elements of different flowers are combined to form a composite hybrid and seemingly cultivated plants are featured in wild landscapes (Shaw 1993, 664). Marinatos (1993, 193-194) defines such landscapes which deliberately mix all kinds of animals and plants together to create a fantasy world of abundance and fertility, as “religious”.

However, monkeys are also often placed in similar terrain, which has led to varied interpretations: some stressing their profane nature as pets or crocus pickers (see Chapter 4.1.4 below) (Shaw 1993, 670-671; Rehak 1999a, 706-707), whilst others stress their sacred nature as companions of divinity (Marinatos 1984, 116). In Egypt monkeys appear mainly in wall paintings as pets sitting under their owners' chairs. They are also shown on board ships (Bietak 2000, 525), which seems to indicate that they were ferried around the Mediterranean, maybe as part of an elaborate system of gift exchange: valued as “exotics holding intrinsic power by virtue of their foreign origin” (Parker 1997, 348). But, as is the case with many Minoan depictions: all is not as it seems. The monkey depicted is generally believed to be the same species depicted in Egyptian art; *ceropithecus*, and although a number appear to have similar characteristics, in many cases Thera artists have rendered them highly

anthropomorphic (unlike their Cretan counterparts, oddly enough, who maintain realistic bodies). So, although it seems highly likely that the Minoan world adopted monkey imagery from Egypt, they clearly adapted it to their specific requirements. Even in Egyptian art new themes became popular in-line with social variations: changes would be even more likely to occur when a motif was transferred to another environment. The monkey's behaviour might have remained constant, but not its significance: symbolic or otherwise (Greenlaw 2005, 72-73; Rehak 1999a, 707).

2.2.2 Sex and Gender Minoan Style

Pierre Bourdieu uses the concepts of *habitus* and *hexis* to illustrate how childhood is gendered. He contends that through *habitus* (unconsciously internalised structures derived from external structures existing in society) children learn the cultural expectations for their sex and this is further developed through *hexis*. *Hexis* could be seen as an embodied *habitus*: different social experiences created by gender, class and age are imprinted on and lived out through the body (Gilchrist 1999, 81 & 90). This concept of gendered embodiment is thus a fluid process: gender is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated throughout a life time: “individuals both create and are themselves created, as nature becomes culture and culture becomes nature” (Sofaer, 2006, 73, 113-116). *Habitus* and *hexis* operate across all cultures and time periods and should be borne in mind when attempts are made to understand the remnants of a previous civilization. But, an awareness of the process can also shed light on how modern perceptions of gender permeate our interpretations of these ancient societies. We are products of, as well as instigators of change in our environment and attitudes, and this has to be appreciated and attempts made to overcome these prejudices to open up other avenues of investigation.

An example gleaned from Akrotiri can be used to illustrate how easily interpretations are influenced by our expectations. On discovering the “Boxing Boys” fresco in Building Beta, Spyridon Marinatos (1971, 49) was initially inclined to identify the figure on the left as a girl as “it shows a certain indolence and placidity”. This was in spite of the red colouring of the skin fragments which would have under other circumstances unequivocally rendered it male (as in fact turned out to be the case). Cultural expectations overrode the archaeological evidence in the first instance.

Cultural expectations are also clearly put to the test when encountering women behaving in a sexually “inappropriate” manner. Although, as has been noted in Chapter 1.4 above, very few

depictions of intimate interactions between males and females exist, there are a few seals which do show such scenes: sometimes considered to be examples of *hieros gamos*. In all of these the woman is clearly dominant: she is variously larger, seated, higher, older and clothed (as opposed to the naked or near-naked men). In two out of three cases her hand either rests on top of the male's or grasps his hand (in the other, the male is probably grasping her wrist, but all other signs of the female's importance are present). In the only depiction of a couple having sexual intercourse, a seal from EM III, it is the female doing the embracing (Koehl 2001, 239-240). An attempt has been made to explain the size discrepancy between the couples as indicative of the "importance of the female in reproduction" (Marinatos 1993, 192). However, these seals clearly do not conform to the "usual" female = passive, male = active. The Minoan experience of *habitus* and *hexis* would have been built up on very different foundations than our own.

Breaking down barriers between culture and nature can be glimpsed in the Minoan attitude towards all aspects of their *lifeworld*: flora, fauna and not least sex/gender. The ambiguously-sexed bull dancers and other images on seals (e.g. the Mochlos ring) suggest that sex/gender might not have been a clear-cut binary division paramount in defining roles within Minoan society. Mark Cameron conducted an interesting exercise to illustrate the conservatism of design in Minoan painting (Evely 1999, 258). However, it is equally useful to underscore the minute differences between their

portrayals of the sexes: with just a few strokes of the brush a male metamorphoses into a female (Fig. 5). Watrous (1995, 506) suggests that similar ambiguities on seals were maybe created on purpose by the seal owner for reasons which

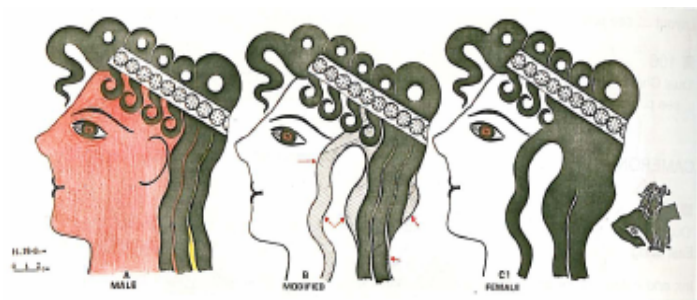


Fig. 5: From Male to Female in a Few Strokes of the Brush

will surely remain obscure. But it might rather be that what we consider undeniable facts of existence may have been more viewed more flexibly and may not have even been considered of prime importance. In the same way as certain "fantastic" beasts such as griffins, or anthropomorphised blue monkeys do not necessarily denote divinity but are an intermingling of what we would consider the real and imaginary in a way totally comprehensible to the Minoans.

However, in spite of these many ambiguities, the Minoans like most other societies, seems to have acknowledged some form of male/female division (Sørensen 2004, 51). It is also clear from the iconography which survives, that women were major players in what might have been a not-so-theocratic culture as the general consensus would have it. If we move into this somewhat more secular sphere, then it becomes more difficult to assume that it was governed by men: if they are not goddesses who are these imposing women?

2.3 Seek and ye shall find

As Minoan scripts still elude decipherment, there can be no absolute confirmation of any depiction as a god or goddess; nor do there appear to be any attributes which can be exclusively associated with any particular character. Nonetheless, there are many references made to goddesses and priestesses pointing out aspects of iconography which “prove” their divinity or their association with divinity. However, as Michael Wedde (1995, 493) asserts “the basis for such identifications is frequently unsubstantiated statements to a specific effect: for rarely clearly formulated reasons, the same figure is variously designated goddess, priestess, or adrant”. Candace Dawn Cain (1997, 12) agrees and points out that this is a characteristic of Minoan art which nearly all commentators remark upon. She provides a list of authors who have made interesting observations in this connection (including Crowley 1989, 169; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 215; Hallager 1985; Marinatos 1993, Chapter 7 & 243; Wedde 1992, 1995 & 1995b). “In fact” she continues, “the Minoan artist rarely depicts a personage who is, at least to our modern eyes, unambiguously divine: often we cannot distinguish mortals from gods, priestesses from goddesses”. So it would seem that too much theocentric searching inevitably turns up a more theocentric Aegean Bronze Age than the archaeological record actually warrants (Herva 2006, 234). Or as Sean Dougherty phrases it: “It is all too apparent that there is a stern refusal to look at Minoan society outside of a religious context. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate the Minoan images with a less Evansian eye, to ask not ‘what god or goddess is this?’ but ‘why is this a god?’”(Dougherty 2004, 201).

Not only is the initial deification process subjective but, once it is made, it influences other determinations of divinity. By so doing it can also define the nature of the religion to which they (the deities) and their adorants apparently belong. The Isopata gold signet ring has been dated stylistically to LM I although its context suggests LM IIIA. It features four women making various gestures and a small “floating” female figure (Fig. 6). This is usually

interpreted as an epiphany scene: the “floating woman” is appearing to her adorants. It is interesting in this discussion as one of the larger women has also been identified by some scholars as a goddess due to her upheld hands, which is commonly believed to be a symbol of divine blessing or salutation. This is based on the same gesture made by many clay statuettes which have been allocated goddess status as they wear distinctive head-dresses (horns, birds

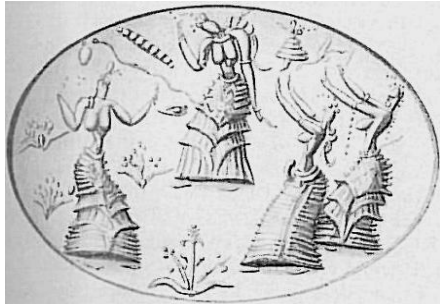


Fig. 6: The Isopata Ring

and other “religious” symbols). However, Helene Whittaker (1997, 52-53) stresses that the meaning of this pose is extremely ambiguous in the MM-LM I-II era and is very unlikely to denote divinity before at least LM III. The uncertainty surrounding which figure, if any, is either a goddess or a representation of one, makes it difficult to infer very much about Minoan religion and ritual. Notwithstanding this

doubt, the long-held belief that Minoan cult was based on ecstatic epiphany was largely based on this particular ring (Cain 2001 44-46). There are other theories to account for such little floating beings other than their divinity: they might be hallucinations of flying humans, or represent the constellations of Orion and Corona Borealis (Herva 2006a, 590). To add to the confusion, there is the insecure dating of the ring, and even if it does belong to the Neopalatial period, as its typology indicates, then calling the woman with the upraised arms a goddess, could be taking a Mycenaean Cretan gesture and transferring it back in time to prove divinity.

I do not necessarily wish to deny the divine status of *all* the designated goddesses in the Minoan world, but rather would like to see them accorded the same possibilities and flexibility granted to their male counterparts. When priests have been identified they “of course, would be in charge of the administration and economy. They would conduct trade and regulate foreign relations”. Priestesses, on the other hand, would have been engaged in much more lady-like tasks: “pouring of libations, taking part in processions, bringing flowers and other offerings to sanctuaries and performing dances would have been common activities” (Marinatos 1984, 26 & 1993, 145). Although iconography could possibly support the activities of the priestesses, it is hard to come up with any concrete evidence for the apparent worldly engagement of the priests. If men had been featured as often and in such obviously authoritative positions as Minoan women were, then there might not have been such a concerted effort to relate this imagery to the divine sphere. It would have been accepted as

normal that men would have been revered, adored, depicted larger, more prominently and been the recipient of gifts or offerings.

2.4 Foreign Influence: Adaptation and Adoption:

Janice Crowley (1995, 476-483) has come up with a “10 point plan”, based on cross-cultural and chronological analogies with Europe through to the Near East to try and identify mortal and immortal V.I.P.’s (as she designates such over-size figures) in the iconographical record. These are: i) abnormality – excrescences and hybridisation; ii) body size – relativity and focus; iii) body shape – especially facial detail; iv) clothing – especially headdress; v) insignia – especially object held; vi) surrounding symbols – especially throne or podium; vii) familiars – animals and fantastic creatures; viii) official portrait – head or full length; ix) audience scenes – homage, process and investiture; and x) characteristic activities – special powers and celebrated deeds. She concludes that only i) and vii) consistently indicate divinity whilst all the other attributes could indicate mortal or immortal beings and other sources have to be invoked when these aspects are not present. However, Crowley concedes that the Egyptian Pharaoh managed to combine both the human and divine states; whereas Mesopotamian kings always retained their mortality however favoured they were by the gods. Nonetheless she believes that as we do not know what the situation was like in the Aegean it behoves us to look on the Egyptian ruler as an exception. I would tend to regard the Minoan world as another exception: it does not fit neatly into the Near Eastern model. It has always been clear that their culture was unique in a number of other ways. There is an absence of real temples and cult statues, few obvious depictions of divinities and no obvious (at least to our eyes, accustomed to Egypt and the Near East) symbols of power: crowns, flails, rods and rings are singularly lacking. Instead, the Minoans appear to have had a penchant for nature sanctuaries and “nature-centrism in art”. Thus the predilection to transfer Near Eastern traits into a Minoan framework does not always take these unique features into account (Herva 2006a, 589).

Contacts between the Minoan world and the wider Mediterranean must have resulted in the exchange of some iconographic ideas. However, after making them their own, it cannot necessarily be assumed that they retained the same meaning as their indigenous origins. Only certain eastern motifs were reproduced by Aegean artists and craftsmen and women and it is clear that at least some of them can in no way have had the same meaning in both their

country of origin and in their new home. For example, the “mirror reverse” composition which was taken up by the Mycenaeans was adopted from Egypt where it symbolised the duality of their culture: Upper and Lower Egypt; white crown, red crown; vulture and cobra etc. This cannot have had the same resonance in the Aegean, but was likely adopted as a useful motif to express their own subject matter (Crowley 1989, 269-271).

In his influential article on the Cretan Griffin, Frankfort (1936/37, 106, 116) points out that “fantastic creatures often undergo profound changes of meaning when changing their habitat”. Although Evans believed that the griffin reached Aegean shores via Egypt, Frankfort argues that the Aegean griffin is of Syrian origin. This is still generally accepted as the most likely scenario today. Unfortunately, there are no Syrian texts which refer to the griffin, so, we have to rely on iconography in the same way as is necessary for Minoan depictions. But it is clear that on arrival in the Aegean the beast became a new subspecies. It developed what are now considered typical Aegean traits: spirals on the neck and upper wing edges, “addermarks” or zigzag patterns on its wings and a crest (Evely 1999, 108). The griffin is an amalgamation of two real predators: the lion and a bird of prey. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms of Egypt, the bird was clearly a hawk but it is not so clear which bird was the prototype of the Aegean version. Evans opted for the eagle, but if this is the case, it is not a very good rendering: the raised crown of the white head and the long, sinuous neck on many representations looks rather more vulture-like (Morgan, 1988, 49-50). Adoption and adaptation certainly resulted in a uniquely Minoan creation.

The term *potnia theron* was designated in the late nineteenth century to refer to compositions where a centrally-placed woman appears to be exerting control over the animal world. It is usually considered to be the feminine version of the Near Eastern Master of Animals which was especially popular in Mesopotamia from the fourth millennium BCE. However, what constitutes a Mistress of Animals has never been formally defined so individual interpretations come into play. But it usually seems to require a human figure accompanied by one or two animals. These animals distinguish themselves by their type, gestures and attitudes which could be seen to symbolise control or power. Whilst still rare, depictions of the Mistress of Animals become more widespread in the last half of the second millennium: the first “true” examples of the genre were probably of Mitannian and Syrian origins. This composition is invariably invoked to prove the divinity of flanked figures in Minoan and Mycenaean art (mainly glyptic). However, besides obvious similarities with the Near Eastern

genre, the Aegean version also exhibits marked differences and was clearly adapted to suit local taste: the symmetrical aspect, stance, upraised hands, accompanying lions and griffins and its appearance on glyptic are retained whereas the prevalence of female figures and Minoan symbols and dress were local preferences. Whether she was adopted and adapted from the Near Eastern “hero-based” Master of Animals or from later female versions is debated (Barclay, 2001, 373-381).

Some maintain that the Mycenaeans might have adopted the genre via the Minoans (e.g. Barclay 2001, 380 & Marinatos 1993, 153-154). This is obviously contingent on very complicated chronology issues which exist in both the Near East and the Aegean and the difficulties with dating glyptic which appear to be stylistically different from their context. It has also been suggested that the Mycenaeans could have provided the prototype for the Syrian *potnia theron* with winged lions or griffins (Tamvaki 1974, 287). Traits such as wing and breast curls found on Aegean sphinxes start to appear on Near Eastern sphinxes in Mistress of Animals compositions e.g. on a carved tusk from Ugarit dated to LB II-III (Crowley 1989, 39 n. 8). Olga Krzyszkowska (2005, 143) points out that antithetical and symmetrical compositions involving humans only become common in Aegean glyptic after LM II-IIIa and that whilst it was probably known in LM I-II, there are no securely-dated Neopalatial examples of this genre⁶. Janice Crowley (1989, 36) speculates that the so-called “Mother on the Mountain” impression might be the earliest example of a “mistress of animals”. However, as most scholars now ascribe a LM II date to the depiction (Krattenmaker 1995a, 49-50, n. 2) this comes under the Mycenaean Cretan category. If this was the case, then not only do we have a geographical and chronological discrepancy i.e. this motif in an Aegean context seems to have been mainly a Mycenaean (postdating the Neopalatial period) phenomenon from the Mainland, but we may have a situation where the Near Eastern model for a Mycenaean *Potnia Theron* was first imported to the Aegean and then re-exported in a modified version to the Near East. This adaptation is then used to forge a link with an earlier Minoan edition (that might or might not have existed). But, it should be pointed out that Crowley does not mention the “goddess” in Xeste 3. If she can be considered to fit under this rubric, then she would be the only artistic version which has an indisputable *terminus ante quem* of late LM I. If she stands alone in the Neopalatial period as representative of her type - she is certainly unique

⁶ It is often assumed that Mistress of Animals depictions first appear in LM I (e.g. Barclay, 2001, 379). But many of the glyptic examples attributed stylistically to LM I are found in much later contexts (Barclay, 2001, 380 n. 48), so dating is clearly uncertain.

amongst wall paintings (Morgan 1988, 51) - then she would be somewhat of an anomaly and subsequently should not be considered part of a corpus of Minoan examples of the genus. Only one Minoan *potnia theron* makes inferences over her nature even more speculative. It is also interesting to note that from LB III interest in the Aegean seems to have shifted from the Mistress of Animals composition to Master of Animals: women were being replaced by a male “heroic” figure.

2.5 Guardians and Groupies of the “Goddess”

In spite of the fact that both lions and griffins appear on the purely mortal plane, it is usually assumed that being flanked by them denotes divinity. However, both these beasts can be hunters, draught animals and companions with very little else to elevate the figures which they accompany as divine. This argues against their status as divine markers (Wedde 1995, 500-501). A parallel can be drawn with British iconographic mythology: the unicorn is a royal emblem, but there has never been any suggestion that it is “an emblem of the cosmic unity of nature” (Renfrew 2000, 915). It also appears that their status often depends on which sex is being flanked or associated with these creatures.

In Egypt lions are symbols of the bravery of the god and king or god/king. In Mesopotamia they allude to the valour of heroes (Morgan 1988, 49). This is often overlooked when they accompany women. Nilsson (1971, 366) calls women in scenes in which they are associated with lions, “hunting goddesses” and extends this title to a woman depicted on a gem, shooting an arrow: “this at least seems more probable than to assume that a mortal huntress is represented, for although the wall paintings from Tiryns show women in a chariot on their way to the hunt, hunting was of course not a common sport of women in Minoan days”.

People wearing long, banded robes are commonly labelled priests on analogy with similarly garbed men in Syrian art (Rehak 1995, 110-111). This idea originated with Evans (1935, 397-419) and has been taken up by Nanno Marinatos (1993, 124, 141) even though a number of them are associated with griffins. But, you cannot have it both ways. If these men are priests *and* associated with griffins, then it makes it very difficult to argue that the griffin is an exclusively divine attribute (Thomas & Wedde 2001, 9). Nonetheless, griffins, sphinxes and bucrania ornamenting a dress (presumed to be feminine attire) on a fragment from the NW Fresco Heap at the palace of Knossos have been designated as animals belonging to the realm

of the goddess as they represent the categories of guardian/predator and sacrificial victim respectively. However, when “priests” are depicted with griffins it seems that this might be able to be explained by their shared characteristics of power expressed as predatory aggression (Marinatos 1993, 141, 132). It should also be pointed out that these banded robes are not exclusively male attire. Although postdating the Neopalatial period, fresco fragments from a dump at Ayia Triadha dating to LM IIIA, depict a woman in such a robe. Four women are also clothed in like manner on the Ayia Triadha Sarcophagus (LM IIIA): two are in a chariot pulled by griffins and two in another chariot drawn by goats (or horses)⁷ (Younger 1995a, 164).

Griffins flank the throne in the “Throne Rooms” at both Pylos⁸ and Knossos⁹. This has been widely considered a symbol of either their association with rulers, their role as supernatural protectors of rulers or as a sign of divine favour (Long 1974, 29). Whether it was a man or a woman who was enthroned at Knossos has been hotly debated since Evans wavering between the options finally opted for a female occupant. She is of course a priestess or a priestess queen. Although priestess queen sounds a reasonable alternative, I think a little more attention could be paid to the possibility of a queen, without a divine qualifier. Reusch argued in 1958 that this room was the setting for the playing out of an epiphany scene. This grew out of her observations of the composition of a group of seals showing frontally depicted “goddesses” flanked by griffins. She noticed the similarity between these and the Knossian griffins and discovered that on some of the seals the griffins were placed higher than the woman in the centre. In the same way, the Knossian griffins would have been higher than the person seated on the throne. From this she inferred that a priestess literally sat in for, or even “became” the goddess during a ritual (Niemeier 1987, 165; Nilsson 1971, 360-363). However, in light of interpretations given to similar placements at Pylos, it would only seem “fair” to consider a mortal (female) ruler at Knossos as well.

Both griffins *and* lions flank the throne at Pylos. Surely this should render the occupant divine? Nonetheless, the occupant is invariably assumed to be a male ruler, although the lack of depictions of this *wanax* is disconcerting. The preoccupation with a male sitting on the throne is reinforced by the widespread use of the term “king’s megaron”. Smaller, secondary

⁷ Some say horses (e.g. Younger 1995, 169), some say goats (e.g. Long 1973, 55).

⁸ Fresco in situ on the wall at the time of the final LH IIIB2 (LM IIIB2) destruction (Immerwahr 1990, 199).

⁹ Probably LM II (Hood 2005, 65).

versions are usually dubbed the “queen’s megaron”¹⁰, even though in the case of Pylos, the smaller megaron was also decorated with griffins and lions (Rehak 1995, 95-96). In this instance, presumably the “queen” is allowed mortal status due to her supporting role as a consort to a male ruler. However, Paul Rehak (1995, 110-112) paints a more nuanced picture. He draws attention to the Campstool Fresco from Knossos where men in long robes sit, drinking at a ceremony presided over by an enthroned woman. It is reminiscent of a scene at Pylos depicting men in similar robes. This coupled with the large quantity of drinking vessels found in a room adjoining the Pylian megaron could indicate that the throne was occupied by a woman who presided over a communal drinking and feasting centre. He also points out that Linear B tablets do not just refer to a *wanax* but to several interrelated power figures that seem to have had different spheres of interest or authority. This includes a *potnia* (or “she who has power”) which he believes was probably a secular rather than a divine title.

It could be argued that if a ruler is likely to have occupied the throne room at Pylos and Mycenae, then surely we don’t have to look for a divinity at Knossos, in spite of the fact that a woman is traditionally expected to have been seated on the throne. Griffins and lions clearly do not (necessarily) a divinity make. Thus, “the supernatural griffin is a symbol of divine favour and along with his earthly companion he is perceived to accompany and protect the enthroned ruler in perpetuity. The fearsome duo may also serve as metaphors for the ruler’s physical strength ... they operate explicitly as markers of the elevated station of the person associated with the throne, declaring that the figure possessing that honour is both extraordinary and inviolable” (Cain 1997, 226-227). They do not necessarily guard an immortal being, but a V.I.P.

2.6 The Mystery at Knossos: The Case of the Missing Monarch

The existence of Evans’ goddess of nature has never been seriously questioned (Marinatos 1993, 147). Since he “discovered” this Minoan goddess *and* a priest king at Knossos, Minoan women have almost invariably been placed within the sacred sphere, whilst the clearly less significant males are usually free to roam the secular realm. Running parallel with these assumptions is the general mystification over the lack of ruler iconography: where is the

¹⁰ This is also consistently the case in the Cretan “palaces”: starting with Evans, when two halls appear in the same building the larger is traditionally called the “men’s” or “king’s” quarters while the smaller, more private one as the “women’s” or “queen’s” quarters (Hitchcock, 1994, 16).

Minoan King? Evans found his Priest King, sporting a “feathered crown” in a fresco at Knossos. However, his identification was based on a highly dubious reconstruction which according to recent studies might be a composite of several different figures. Not only that, but it has since been re-examined by Mark Cameron who found no traces of the tell-tale red on the torso fragments, which were supposed to indicate that it belonged to a male figure: he believes they were originally white. R. F. Willetts (1962, 90) compares the Priest King with the figures on the Agia Triadha Sarcophagus and concludes that as the crown is also worn by one of the *women* on the sarcophagus, “it was not apparently royal”. Thus, the Priest King’s identity has been left hanging: was it a man, a woman or a sphinx (all of whom have been spotted wearing plumed headdresses) (Koehl 1995, 24; Davis 1995, 12)? Very rarely is there a connection made between the abundance of depictions of important women and the absent king: “it is striking that the ruler images produced by those civilizations, i.e., the seated king as a god from Egypt, or the king shown in association with the gods from the Near East, are absent from Aegean art” (Davis 1995, 11).

Seated men *are* uncommon in Minoan iconography. Allison Coleman Smith (2003, 111) has worked out that in Crete, which accounts for 45% of all seated figures in Aegean wall paintings, *all* of them are female. In the Cyclades there is one example of a seated male whereas on the Mainland 50% of all seated figures are men. Although she does not include seals in her calculations, seated males are likewise rarely depicted on this medium (Younger 1995a, 169-170). In the Near East, rulers are commonly represented seated: “in fact, the very act of sitting is synonymous with status” (Winter 1986, 255). Nonetheless, it is still not commonplace to consider Minoan women candidates for this mysterious ruler. A goddess could possibly wield power over men, but a mortal woman?

On a seal impression from Chania, a small female figure hands (or receives?) a sceptre to (or from?) a women seated on a stepped platform (Fig. 7). Due to comparisons with another figure seated on a similar platform, with the same dress but winged and with the head of a bird, other women seated on such structures are considered most likely to be deities (Krattenmaker 1995, 126). However, the otherworldly presence of the “bird woman” might not have been considered quite so exotic by the Minoans (see Chapter 2.2.1 above). It is also possible that a mask was being used in some form of ceremony. There are many ethnographic



Fig. 7: Women Receiving/Presenting a Sceptre

examples which point in this direction (Younger 1995, 505). However, it is not so much the logic which I find flawed, but rather that it was felt necessary to establish a goddess in the first instance. It could be a variation of presentation scenes from the UR III seals, that depict a seated king (sometimes with appropriated divine attributes and an intermediary) being approached by an individual who is presumably the seal owner. Irene Winter (1986, 253-265) argues that this legitimises not just the power of the king but the seal-owner's relationship with the ruler. In this instance, both figures are female, which might have hindered the interpretation process. It is possible that if the two figures had been male (or at least the seated one) there might have been little need to look into otherworldly realms.

Another scene on a seal from Mycenae is also relevant in this context: a variation on the same theme. Here, a large seated, female figure is faced by a smaller male with a spear. Although Nilsson (1971, 352) believes the scene to be secular, he does not consider - what to me seems an obvious route of enquiry - the possibility of a subject greeting his ruler. Willetts (1962, 90) disagrees with Nilsson's temporal interpretation: he believes she must be a goddess as "no mortal woman could sit enthroned among rocks to welcome a diminutive young man in any domestic or social relation".

In Tutankhamun's golden shrine, the queen is depicted fastening an amulet around his neck (Fig. 8). The necklace is a symbol of protection of the king.



This analogy is used to imply that the Jewel Fresco (Fig. 9)¹¹ might also have symbolic meaning (Smith 2003, 25-26), although it is not taken to what I would consider its natural conclusion. Surely a hand



Fig. 9: The Jewel Fresco

fastening a necklace around a neck, as is the case in the Jewel Fresco, should raise a red flag to those engaged in searching for the missing ruler? Or is it hindered by the fact that it is a *red* hand and a *white* neck? It is interesting to note that this did raise red flags in some quarters,

¹¹ Probably MM IIIB (Hood 2005, 65).

but a different interpretation was made. Although it was initially considered possible that the woman was a high priestess “the fact that the adornment is done by a male, to judge from the dark color of the hand, does hint at an interaction of a sexual nature” (Marinatos 1993, 56).

2.7 From Woman to “Goddess”

Tracing back claims of divinity feels like wandering around in a labyrinth worthy of hiding the Minotaur himself. Nonetheless I have attempted to do precisely this: get back to the original source of some of these assumptions by following citations accompanying statements proclaiming the presence of a goddess.

2.7.1 Xeste 3

Who first decided that Xeste 3 housed a goddess and on what basis? Her discoverer, Spyridon Marinatos, initially believed that they had uncovered a goddess or a queen due to her elaborate dress and multiple necklaces: a possible “mistress of animals” was anticipated. This impression was reinforced when a blue monkey and a griffin were found to flank the woman. It is interesting to note that after finding the female figure, fragments of a monkey (which seemed to belong on the left side of the woman) and what appeared to be a bird, the technical staff was instructed to see if this bird would fit on the right. When this was achieved, the hunt was on to find a lion-like beast, to confirm the *potnia theron* hypothesis. This was of course found and it transpired to be a griffin. Due, to the team’s expectations, the picture was filled out. It begs to be asked whether such a composition would have been found if the picture was not already painted in their collective minds: it is certainly likely that it would have taken much longer to achieve. However, Marinatos initially left the question open as to “whether the female figures represent a goddess and nymphs, or a queen and attendants” (Marinatos 1976, 33-34).

His daughter, Nanno Marinatos, like Evans before her, is a fervent believer in the religious nature of Minoan/Theran society (see for example Marinatos 1993) and it is thus unsurprising that she should come down on the side of divinity for the Xeste 3 lady: “that this figure is a goddess is certain. She is physically separated from the human community by the platform, the tripartite form which has definite religious connotations; also it is resting on incurved altars. The goddess is symbolically separated because her animal attendants are exotic and one is fabulous; we are thus in the realm of the fantastic” (Marinatos 1984, 61-62). This quote

provides the main reasons for her deification and the book from which it was taken has been highly influential in establishing the scene as an initiation ritual presided over by a fertility goddess. Many scholars refer to her works when mentioning the “goddess” (e.g. Rehak 1999, 12; Vanschoonwinkel 1990; Davis 1986, 402; Marinatos 1993, 151). Although others, who make no citation when referring to the “goddess”, might have made the identification independently, they must have absorbed and been influenced by her and her father’s reasoning. However, the original impetus for the identification of her as a goddess might have its roots even further back in time. Evans was undoubtedly the first to associate saffron with a Minoan divinity: he believed it to be, along with the lily, an attribute of the Great Goddess who may have presided over a flourishing Cretan saffron industry (Evans, 1921, 265). It is difficult to escape the connection between saffron and the “goddess” in Xeste 3, *ergo* her divinity.

2.7.2 The Mochlos Ring

Richard Seager (1912, 90 & n. 2) the original discoverer of the ring, recognised the woman on the boat as divine: “The goddess, who so often figures on the rings from the mainland, is shown in a new aspect, namely, as arriving in her ceremonial barge ... there is good reason to suppose that we see here the type of sacred barge supposed to be peculiar to the Cretan Mother Goddess”. He also seems convinced, not just by the sacred barge but by the “sacred tree which figures in the scene is always an attribute of the female divinity and usually appears in all cult scenes where the goddess plays a leading part”. However, he was very likely influenced not only by Evans *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*, published in 1901, which touted the importance of the “sacred tree” in the Aegean, but also by Evans’ (1908, 196) publication of the ring in 1908, before Seager published his book in 1912. Thus, it was actually Evans who first identified her in print: “the marine aspect of the Goddess, of which other indications had already appeared, is thus made clear”.

She is also commonly pronounced a goddess “based upon the special character of her vehicle and the appearance of floating symbols in the upper portion of the representation” (Cain 2001, 41). The floating symbols were tentatively identified but not interpreted by Seager, as they were, at the time, new to Minoan cult scenes (Seager 1912, 90). But since then similar “UFOs” have cropped up in other depictions for example on the Ashmolean ring and on sealings from Agia Triadha (Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 155) and have been subsequently added

to the list of divine attributes (see for example, Marinatos 1993, 163-164 n. 66; Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 157).

2.8 Summary of Chapter 2

Although it is no secret that our cultural expectations influence the questions we ask and thus the answers we find, it is still difficult to sort out what lies behind a commonly-accepted statement or theory. If our *lifeworlds* contained a longer history of females stalking the halls of power, the Minoan world might not have become so overpopulated with female divinities. This in turn might have changed our perception of Minoans being uncommonly preoccupied with religion. That having been said, I am not necessarily trying to place all these depictions within a temporal framework, but attempting to uncover the underlying expectations for behaviour based on gender. Most interpretations rely on analogy with the Near East, Egypt and the Mycenaean world. Analogies are, of course, a matter of necessity without having written sources to refer to. However, the adaptation process involved in one culture appropriating some of the trappings from another can distort the picture, literally and figuratively: particularly when transposed onto a culture which exhibits signs of having rather different values (particularly, in this case, when it comes to gender weighting).

It also seems possible that the Minoans might not have recognised such a distinct barrier between the sacred and profane as is customary in the western world today. Their artwork seems laden with ambiguity, both in their portrayal of nature and the human form. This could also indicate that what appears to be an object of worship, or indicator of divinity, might not have been part of a supernatural realm, but a possibility in a world with fluid borders of reality. In a similar manner, a clear dichotomy between males and females might not have been a primary factor: either in their art or their culture. This rather cavalier attitude to sex or gender could of course, invalidate our preoccupation with the concept. All the searching and assumptions might be based on a notion which would have been laughable to the Minoans.

When trying to track down the very first reference to the divinity of our lady in Xeste 3, what seems clear is that the original identification made by Marinatos (senior and junior) must have formed the background for all future interpretations. However, the fact that Evans had originally associated saffron with his Great Goddess can hardly have escaped the notice of later researchers and would have been percolating behind and forming their work as part of

their *intersubjective* fields. When the frescoes were discovered in Xeste 3, they must have seemed tailor-made to support Evans' eerily apposite precognition.

In the case of the Mochlos ring, Seager believed the lady in the boat was a goddess (although it was Evans who first put the notion in print). Seager also seems to be referring to Evans when he says that "there is good reason to suppose that we see here the type of sacred barge supposed to be peculiar to the Cretan Mother Goddess". Evans' recognition of the Mother Goddess was clearly instrumental in Seager's interpretation. It even seemed to be behind his initial recognition of the ambiguously-sexed figure in the boat as a female as this would be the only scenario which would fit with a pantheon under the sway of goddesses.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT DO WOMEN DO?

Although women in the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean appear to have in general played second fiddle to men in most public positions of authority, they were not without influence and presence in many pursuits and occupations. If these analogies can be drawn upon to supplement our knowledge of their Aegean counterparts, it would indicate that *at least* these opportunities were likely to have been open to Minoan women. Judging by their pre-eminence in iconography, it is not unreasonable to assume that their participation might have been far greater.

3.1 They Supervise, Write, Treat the Sick...

Texts from Sumer spanning the twenty-first and twentieth centuries BCE show that women formed a large part of the labour force: and not just in menial positions. Prominent women (wives of governors) supervised and negotiated financial and trading transactions. Women also worked in the weaving industry, in agriculture, on the irrigation system, with tow boats, as oil pressers (although at lower wages than their male co-workers). However, apparently one of the major problems in identifying the sex of the workers is that the Sumerian language does not differentiate between masculine and feminine and thus “many of the persons we assume to be men may be women, and the women’s role in the society may be much more extensive than we now imagine” (Van de Mieroop, 1989, 53-66).

In Old Kingdom Egypt women were to be found in administrative positions as overseers, directors, inspectors and in “middle management” in the palace. They seem to have been solely responsible for weaving (unlike in the New Kingdom when men and women were involved in equal measure). There seems to have been some sort of “hiccup” in the Middle Kingdom, when females appear to have been not only deprived of many of these roles (with the exception of spinning and weaving), but also demoted in their religious status within the priesthood. Although there *is* evidence for four female scribes, indicating that there were probably others, as the record is by no means complete (Lesko 1989, 16; Ward 1989, 35 & 37). The 18th Dynasty records men and women working together baking bread, brewing beer, working in the fields and waiting on guests at banquets. Women also held positions with captivating titles like “Mistress of the Wig Workshop” and “Mistress of the Dining Hall” (Smith 2003, 130).

In the Near East during the second millennium, there are written records mentioning a number of female scribes: fourteen from Sippar in Babylon, nine at Mari and a Neo-Assyrian document lists six associated with the palace. Therefore, “it is evident that the female scribe was not merely an ancillary phenomenon and that the training of women must have occupied the attention of at least some schools to a not insignificant degree” (Smith 2003, 133).

There is record of a female physician, Peseshet, who was an overseer of other female doctors in the fifth or sixth Dynasty in Egypt. Although this is the only mention of a woman in the Egyptian medical profession, it should be borne in mind that only 150 physicians are mentioned in papyri during the entire 2,500 years covering the Old Kingdom through to the Late Period. Also, the fact that this one woman is the only female mentioned by name has to be weighed against the evidence that as the overseer of female doctors, she must not have been alone. In addition, it is difficult to know whether such discrepancies are due to the arbitrary nature of the evidence left behind or whether it reflects the realities for women’s career choices (Ritner 2000, 116-117). Women in Mesopotamia seem also to have had the possibility to train as physicians: an old Babylonian text from the Time of Hammurabi (first half of the 18th century BCE) mentions a female physician employed in the palace at Larsa (Rohrlich-Leavitt 1977, 54).

Women were also among the earliest perfumers and as this involved developing the processes of distillation, extraction and sublimation could therefore be considered the first chemists. The perfume industry was very important in Babylon: the same substances were used in medicines, religion as well as cosmetics. A Babylonian text dating to around the 13th century BCE mentions two female supervisors of the perfume industry: Tapputi-Belatekallim and [...] ninu (Alic 1986, 21; Levey 1956, 380-382).

3.2 They Weave ...

It is usually assumed that women do the world’s weaving. This is often based on the idea that it is compatible with child rearing. This has been contested by Lucia Nixon (1999, 562-564) who, as an amateur weaver and mother, has also questioned other women about their experiences in trying to combine the two. It was generally agreed that weaving is so absorbing and complex that to have a child under the age of five underfoot was not a good combination. Nixon, also points out that when men are the weavers (or potters or farmers) *they* do not look

after children. Such questions are based on our cultural expectations and that in reality no tasks are compatible with childcare.

In the case of the Aegean Bronze Age, Homer is often quoted as proof that women did the weaving and Penelope and her women apparently performed the task in a room on the upper floor. This is frequently employed not only to show which sex wove, but also to locate sequestered quarters for women: often on the second storey. This is also often used as an analogy to cover the preceding Minoan period. However, it is wise to be particularly cautious of analogies involving the Mycenaeans, especially in the period following LM II. Due to their proximity in time and space and a clear similarity in iconographic style, such comparisons are seductive but deceptive. In spite of their closeness in certain ways, the two societies might have had rather different attitudes – particularly towards the sexes. A study of Aegean wall painting showed that women on Crete seemed to have participated in a broader range of social activities and were less restricted in social situations than their Mainland counterparts. 50% of all females-only frescoes on Crete are set outdoors, whilst 92% of those from the mainland are set indoors. The author of the study, (Smith 2003, 111) suggests that this could indicate that Mycenaean women were secluded. But what it *does* show is that space appeared to be gendered. Besides the obvious reservations over to what extent Homer reflects the Bronze Age or rather his *lifeworld* in the 8th century BCE, it could be asked which came first – women's quarters on the first floor or weaving production areas?

In the Minoan world it is true, archaeological evidence, mainly in the form of loom weights, indicates that weaving seems to have often been located on this floor, although we have no conclusive evidence that it was primarily women who were involved in this task. If room 3 in the West House at Akrotiri can be taken as representative of such a locale, then they would seem not only to be very light, attractive and airy but also, in this specific instance, the only means by which anybody could access the beautifully frescoed rooms opening off of it. It was in this room that 450 loom weights were discovered and in room 6, which opened off room 3, 26 lead disc weights turned up (Hafford 2001, 322; Tzachili 1989). Such rooms were clearly not intended to hide away or devalue their occupants. This arrangement could easily have become so commonplace and a foregone conclusion when designing/building a house that by the time of the events recorded in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* took place, placing these rooms on upper floor might have become a foregone conclusion: just as placing bedrooms on the upper floor is today. Thus, when weaving fell to the lot of woman, they did so on the second

floor – from *habitus* – the rooms were originally for weavers, not women *per se* - rather than to keep them tucked away from prying eyes.

3.3 They Trade...

William Hafford has studied merchants and their activities in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean in both written sources as well as the archaeological record. He believes that these canny traders were probably working for or with the support of large institutions (political or religious). Such merchants would very likely have also functioned as emissaries responsible for negotiating not just commercial but political contracts and thus “the distinction between “ruler” and “merchant” may not be as clear cut as usually assumed” (Hafford 2001, iv & 56).

Weighting tools are not very common in funerary contexts in the Late Aegean Bronze Age (unlike in settlements). But, out of the instances that have been analysed, some common elements were able to be discerned. Although most of the examples come from the mainland starting from LH II-III and in Crete during the LM III period, this is not so surprising in view of the dearth of good documentation for earlier phases. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that such items are invariably found with moderately or very rich grave goods and as far as it is possible to ascertain, considering the lack of confirmed gender identification, appear in equal measure in both male and female burials. Weighting tools were clearly prestige items and may have been symbols of administrative control. Although they might also have had ritual or religious significance, this is not easy to detect from the evidence available (Alberti 2003, 277-283).

At Megiddo in the Levant, what has been described as a “woman’s cloth bag” was uncovered. Its contents were recorded as including beads and spindle whorls (it is worth noting that it was the contents which justified allocating ownership to a woman). However, a number of what were called “semi-precious stones” transpired to be stone weights – amongst which were a monkey and a goat. Many similar weights (whether they be balance or weaving weights) have been found in debris fallen from upper floors and are often associated with textile working and storage. But, an intriguing suggestion has been made about the “spindle whorls”: they might have been a crude form of abacus. The earliest forms of abacus were just pebbles slotted into marked grids on a flat surface. By the Middle Ages, these counters were kept in a

bag very like the one under discussion (Hafford 2001, 205-206 & 324-325). This deserves some consideration, particularly as spindle whorls are consistently associated with women. If many items are no longer spindle whorls (and a number have holes which are too small to hold a spindle) (Hafford 2001, 206) - then will that alter our perception of the occupation and/or sex of the user? If they are rather tools of trade, will these women metamorphose into men? Are a number of areas allocated to women weavers of a different nature, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive?

Both married and unmarried women in Sumer conducted long-distance trade (Rohrlich-Leavitt 1977, 53). The wives of the governors of several cities of the Ur III state had substantial influence in the economic sphere. One of these women, Umma Ninmelam, is recorded supervising gold transactions made by the spouse of King Shulgi. She is not an exception: many other texts note governors' wives involved in similar transactions. Records of court procedures make it clear that women owned, land, orchards, slaves, oxen and silver and were clearly prepared to exercise their legal rights (seemingly having equality with men in the letter of the law at least) to protect them (Van de Mieroop 1989, 62-63).

Cylinder seals depicting quadrupeds and birds are often found in the Near East with collections of weights. It is possible these animals might be linked with merchants due to livestock being one of the first major trade items and could even have been the basis of value standards at a very early stage. This could be reflected on the



Fig. 11: Woman Carrying Animal

women are seated; signifying their importance. These depictions might have had an element of reality in that the seals could have been an indication of the profession of the owner: proclaiming their involvement in the exchange and trade of



Fig. 10: Woman Feeding Animal

seals and weights which often assume faunal shapes (Hafford 2001 229-230, 379-380). There are also a number of Minoan seals which depict women with quadrupeds: feeding them (e.g. Fig. 10), "carrying" them (e.g. Fig. 11) and in other miscellaneous poses (e.g. Fig. 12). In a number of these the



Fig. 12 Woman with Animal (Miscellaneous)

luxury goods in which the animals might possibly represent the goods themselves but could just as likely have been symbolic of other transactions. During the UR III dynasty, texts testify to the role of a queen, Shulgi-simti, who was in charge of the acquisition and distribution of animals to the temples of Nippur and other cities as well as to palace dependents. It is intriguing that most of the people to contribute these animals were women and at least one of her officials was also female (Van de Mieroop 1989, 57) This forges a link between merchants, animals and by extension it could suggest that Minoan women, portrayed interacting with glyptic quadrupeds, held sway within the mercantile field. It is interesting to note that this motif of women appearing with quadrupeds, although occurring in a few Mainland contexts (possibly Minoan imports or copies), was never really taken to heart by the Mycenaeans (Krzyszkowska 2005, 253). This could indicate that women experienced a decline in their commercial influence under the sway of the Mycenaeans: their business ventures may have been curtailed.

Traders, particularly in an island nation, must have had maritime connections. A frieze depicting a procession of ships decorates the walls of room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri. Males seated in their cabins are generally referred to as the ships' captains. The so-called "arrival town" section of the painting shows a number of women placed prominently on various balconies around the town. One woman in particular looms large on a balcony crowned by horns of consecration, with a boy behind her. It has been suggested that she must be the wife of the captain of the largest ship, who along with her son, ceremonially wait to greet her husband (Marinatos 1987, 28 & 32). However, it is equally, if not more possible, that this woman is anxiously awaiting the return of her merchant fleet, not her spouse.

3.3.1 Hair-coil or Hard Cash?

Symbols of power are commonplace in the iconography of the Near East: not least is the "rod and ring". They first appear on the Ur-Nammu stela where the king is being presented these objects by the moon god Nammu. It has been suggested that they might be measuring tools (the rod a measurement of length and the ring a measuring tape) and thus could be symbolic of the king's role as builder. However, another explanation has been mooted: the ring might be a coil of precious metal symbolising the ruler's control over this material and thus a means of controlling and establishing political capital (Hafford 2001, 378-379; Ascalone & Peyronel 2001, 7). Silver coils have been found in merchant assemblages. The terms for these coils in both Sumerian and Akkadian are generally translated as items of personal adornment and

jewellery, but it has been contended that they were also generally understood to refer to a coil of metal used for monetary purposes. They could, of course, have served both purposes as there seemed to be an indistinct line drawn between the two in the Near East and other areas (Powell 1978, 213).

In Sippar in Northern Babylonia, a group or class of women called *naditu* flourished. These women were devotees of the god Samas and lived together in private homes within a collective community. Many of these women conducted and participated in a broad variety of forms of economic enterprises: renting out substantial properties and lending out silver (Van Lerberghe 1994, 5). Because of their visibility in the world of business, they are mentioned in many legal and administrative documents and it is from these texts that most references to trading with these rings or coils occur. It is interesting to note that because these items were associated with the *naditu* women, it “has naturally fostered the interpretation of these words as jewelry” (Powell 1978, 219). This type of assumption could also be responsible for the amount of “jewellery” found in female burials throughout all periods, including the Bronze Age Aegean. It appears as if only a few of these spirals or coils were used as jewellery, but it is likely that a number of the smaller ones might have been used as hair rings (Powell 1978, 230). Although (up until now at least) there is no iconographical evidence for the use of hair-spirals, the burial contexts seem to suggest that they were worn by both sexes in the Aegean (Konstantinidi 2001, 26). If it does transpire that these coils were a form of currency favoured by merchants and symbolic of a ruler’s power, then they do certainly not appear to be a male preserve: the reverse might rather be the case.

3.4 Women, Crocuses and Saffron

The crocus flowers depicted in Minoan frescoes are either *Crocus cartwrightianus* or *Crocus sativus*. The only difference between the two varieties is the length of their stigmas. It is possible that the former is the wild forerunner of the latter. *C. cartwrightianus* is still plucked on Santorini today for its saffron (Day 2005, 49). The ancient authors observe that in antiquity the collection of crocuses took place in Cilicia on Mount Korykos, in Lycia, Lydia, Crete, the Aegean islands, Sicily and Cyrene. But Pliny (in *Historia Naturalis* XX 1.31) refers to the exceptional quality of the Theran crocus (Douskos 1980, 141-142). It would seem to have been revered throughout the ancient world as a spice, an almost universal panacea for all ills, as well as for its properties for dying and perfume.

Hieroglyphic script gave way to Linear A by MM III. Although neither of these has been deciphered, Linear B has yielded up its secrets. Linear B

was developed from Linear A to write Mycenaean Greek.

Evans (1921, 265) believed there was a flourishing saffron industry in Crete. He discovered depictions of the crocus in the hieroglyphic script and identified a “saffron sign” in the later Linear A and B scripts (Fig. 13) (Evans 1921, 643;

Berliner 2006, 185-188). Although Evans’ designation has been called into doubt, other signs have been identified as representing saffron (Forsyth 2000c).

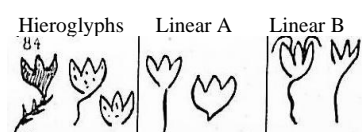


Fig. 13: Arthur Evans’ “Saffron Sign”

Women are clearly associated with the crocus flower on frescoes unearthed at Akrotiri. This has been usefully compiled in a table by Helga Hoyt Berliner (2006, 153-154). It shows that crocuses, saffron stigmas and other motifs redolent of saffron, are a recurrent theme, especially in Xeste 3, but depictions also occur in the House of the Ladies and the West House. The flowers appear as motifs incorporated into the fabric of their clothing, as jewellery, pendants, decoration, as saffron grains/dust and the blooms themselves - either plucked or growing in the rocky landscape. It is also noteworthy that the females seem not to be collecting the whole flower but just the stigmas, which indicates a productive as opposed to a purely religious/ritual task, as it is the stigmas which furnish the saffron (Douskos 1980, 143).

Crocus buds seem to have been a popular jewellery motif for women in the Minoan world – if the evidence furnished by frescoes can be considered representative of women in general - although few pieces have survived in the archaeological record. Fortunately there are some exceptions. These include two gold pins from an EB II grave at Mochlos shaped like crocuses; a mould for casting glass or gold jewellery found in the Kephala tholos (MM IIIB-LMIB) at Knossos which produced beads or plaques in the shape of crocus buds and ivy leaves; and a pin, engraved with crocus blossoms on one side and a Linear A inscription on the other, dated to LM I, discovered at Mavro Spelio (Rehak & Younger 1998, 126-127; Davis 1986, 404-405). Hair pins, although rare both iconographical and extant, seem to occur mainly in female burials throughout the Aegean Bronze Age and tend to be highly individualised. Iconographic evidence from Cretan figurines and Thera frescoes show them adorning female heads. Although men also had long hair, their hairstyles did not seem to have

been so elaborate and might not have needed pinning (Konstantinidi 2001, 26; Younger 1992, 260). If women were the main or sole wearers of hair pins, then there is forged one more link between females and crocus flowers and their by-products.

Crocuses are also an important motive at Knossos. One of the ladies in the Women in Blue fresco from the palace at Knossos plays with her necklace of crocus buds and the Fresco of the Garlands (found near the Stratigraphic Museum) also features a wreath of crocuses. A room off the Central Court at Knossos was decorated with at least two monkeys picking the flowers into baskets. In Egypt, monkeys seem to have often been associated with females and particularly their sexuality. Although it should be noted that in banquet scenes monkeys are frequently depicted under the chairs of tomb owners' wives and in all probability these would have been pet monkeys (Manniche 1987, 43-44; Greenlaw 2003, 71). The House of the Frescoes, also at Knossos, featured crocuses *and* blue monkeys. Monkeys sometimes appear with women in Aegean art, but never men (Rehak 2002, 37; 2004, 96). Thus, if monkeys can be associated with women and both are associated with crocuses and crocus-dominated landscapes, then the link with monkeys, in the Minoan context, might not relate to the Egyptian notion of sexuality, but have a distinctly local flavour: both harvesters and monkeys are co-conspirators in the lucrative and maybe mysterious world of saffron. It is thought-provoking that the "Minoan monkey" does not survive in Aegean glyptic after the end of LM I (Krzyszkowska 2005, 150). The same holds true for Mycenaean wall paintings: not a single example has been located either on the Mainland, or in Crete from LM II onwards (Immewahr 1990, 108, 162, 165). Mycenaean art might be reflecting the new reality: the bond between women and saffron is breaking (or has broken) down.

The flowers occur again with females in room 14 of the villa at Ayia Triadha. A woman near an architectural platform raises her hands authoritatively. Adjoining walls feature a rocky landscape interspersed with clumps of lilies, crocuses, ivy and violets. Another woman kneels amongst these flowers and various fauna: cats, birds and agrimia.

They are a common iconographic element on Neopalatial pottery on Thera and in Crete. If women have a strong connection to the crocus flower and its by-products, then it is possible that they also have a connection to the vessels they were depicted on. A wide array of different types of vases featuring crocuses were found at Akrotiri including several strainers, stirrup jars, *askoi* (perfume flasks), an imported rhyton, a number of cups, an elongated

cooking vessel, a “beehive” and a clay offering table (Berliner 2006, 204; Forsyth 2000a). Women are often depicted with agrimia on seals (see Chapter 3.3 above). Thus, indirect associations between crocuses, women and agrimia can also be found on a number of “goats head” rhyta from Palaikastro which are decorated with the flower (Rehak 1997, 173). There might therefore be a connection between female traders and animals. The rhyton could have been used in trade negotiations (indicated by the agrimia) or rituals associated with saffron (indicated by the crocus). Religion and economics might have been closely linked and one could give rise to the other and vice-versa.

Crocuses are also featured on the faience model costumes (two almost complete and possibly fragments of two others) discovered in the East Temple Repository in the West Wing of Knossos (dated to MM IIIB or early LM IA). Another probable item of clothing with similar decoration has been found on some relief fragments at Palaikastro. But, from LM II onwards, crocus decoration both on clothing and pottery virtually disappears (Rehak 1997, 167-169 & 172 & 2004, 96). The Mycenaeans did not appropriate it as they did the other commonly featured flower, the lily (Morgan 1988, 29). Elizabeth Barber (1991, 314-315 & 322) has analysed iconographic representations of textiles dating to the Neopalatial and the subsequent Mycenaean Cretan era. She found that the wonderfully ornate nature of the cloth used in woman’s clothing during the former period gave way to rather plain fabrics from LM II onwards. Running parallel with this, the simple style and texture of male attire often became very ornate during the Mycenaean Cretan period: appropriating motifs formerly restricted to women. This might be more evidence indicating a switch in status between women and men under the influence of the Mycenaeans. The balance of power between the sexes could have been undergoing profound changes. Female control over aspects of trade (especially of saffron and saffron by-products) and other secular activities might have been curtailed and this was reflected in, and in turn reinforced by the absence of symbols of their power: the crocus.

3.4.1 Saffron: Its Use and Significance

The likely value of saffron as a significant economic commodity connected to the textile, dye and perfume industry was first noticed by Evans. Even in the hieroglyphic script numerous representations of the “saffron sign” suggest that this was the case from a very early stage. He was also convinced by the Linear A tablets from Agia Triadha on which the sign appeared, in a clearly commercial context, connected to maritime enterprises and other significant business

transactions. He believed that it must have been one of the sources of wealth of the “lords of Knossos” throughout the entire Palace period (Evans 1921 281 & 1935, 680, 718). Many scholars agree with his reasoning (e.g. Morgan 1988, 30-3; Douskos 1980, 141).

Plant oils were commonly used throughout the Mediterranean to heal and beautify the body. Such oils are extolled in cuneiform texts as one of the three most important items in life alongside food and clothing (Andreadaki-Vlazi 1999, 48). Essential oil can be and was extracted from the Minoan lily, making it a valued plant in the perfume industry. The lily is another plant that has very clear associations with women. This oil could also be used to heal skin disorders and wounds (Berliner 2006, 275-276). Saffron was also used in perfumes (Forsyth 2000c). Traces of saffron (isophorone) have been discovered in some vessels from Chrysokamino in a context believed to be a herbal remedy workshop (Day 2005, 51). At Akrotiri askoi were found in the same context as strainers. Strainers were likely used to produce decoctions or infusions and this could thus have a connection with perfume production, although, as yet, nothing points to industrial production at this site (Berliner 2006, 204). If women were associated with plants commonly used to make perfumes and/or medicines, it is not inconceivable that they were also in control of some aspects if not all of the production process.

Saffron was the primary source of yellow/orange colouring used to dye textiles in the Near East and the Aegean (Barber 1994, 113). We have iconographical evidence of a yellow dye being used both in Crete and Akrotiri. For example, the transparent veil of one of the “adorants” in Xeste 3 is yellow as is the blouse of one of the mature women (Rehak 2004, 90-91). The women’s clothing in the “Sacred Grove and Dance” fresco at Knossos is also dyed saffron yellow (Forsyth 2000c).

Saffron was also well-known in medical circles. It had many uses in early Mesopotamia in the form of an ointment, poultice, fumigation or drink. It was used for menstrual problems and childbirth, as an enema and ointment for the anus, to counteract painful urination and as a soothing stomachic. In use from around 4000 BCE, its virtues are touted by a number of ancient authors (for example Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis historia* (21.81.138 & 13.2.16) and Celsus in *De medicina* (5.11). It was said to have been used as an astringent to promote healing and to reduce inflammation, for hair and skin problems, as an antidote to poison, a mouthwash, a diuretic and to treat gout. It alleviated insomnia, pain, coughs, headaches, ear

problems, and breasts swollen in lactation. It was also prescribed as a hangover cure and as an aphrodisiac. Uterine problems received a great deal of attention from ancient medical writers and saffron was particularly valued for its ability to induce menstruation. But, even this may come in second to the treatment of eye problems. There are many references in ancient texts to the efficacy of saffron in ocular medicine (Forsyth, 2000d).

Saffron is very rich in vitamins A, B and carotenes. The Bronze Age diet probably consisted primarily of grains, legumes, oil and wine and was possibly lacking in these substances (although this is disputed: see Forsyth 2000e). An indication of such a deficiency can be red-streaked corneas. Paul Rehak (1999, 13) suggests that this could be the cause of the otherwise inexplicable red and blue streaks in the eyes of the people depicted in the Thera frescoes: blues streaks indicating good ocular health (from a saffron-rich diet) and blue indicating the reverse (from a saffron-poor diet). Women, therefore, could have been controlling their bodies (using it as a form of birth control) as well as controlling the distribution of the valuable commodity. However, Phyllis Forsyth (2000, 1-20) refutes the idea that blue streaks in the cornea could be an indication of a diet rich in these vitamins: it is a genetic condition. Although it is correct that a deficiency in these vitamins could have caused the red-streaking. She rather calls attention to the so-called “priestess” of the West House, whose eye appears to be covered by a yellow substance which she suggests could be saffron paste similar to the remedy advised by Celsus (*De Medicina* 6.3-3.3). Eye problems were so common in Egypt that a number of medical papyri devote extensive space to such disorders. Hammurabi’s law code dating from the eighteenth century BCE in Mesopotamia set physicians fees, with higher prices for surgery, especially eye surgery (Spiegel & Springer 1997, 79). As Forsythe points out, as is still the case today, the Bronze Age inhabitants of Thera would have had to endure winds blowing sharp grains of tephra into the eye (in 1929 80% of the islands occupants suffered from trachoma). Saffron-based eye remedies must have been much in demand not only locally but also as a commodity for export: saffron does not appear to have been grown in Egypt (Forsyth 2000e & n. 79).

The birth control pill is based on progesterone derived from plants. Progesterone is metabolised in humans to estrogen. Among the plants which contain female sex hormones is saffron. It has also been bio chemically tested and its phytoestrogens, terpenes and prostaglandin-like chemicals have been found capable under certain conditions to induce labour or abortion. The current abortion-inducing drugs, dinoprostane and misoprostol, are

chemically very similar to crocin (a natural carotenoid found in saffron). The Egyptians were aware of the efficacy of pinene, in for example turpentine, to induce labour and control menstruation. Pinene's chemical structure is almost identical to saffranal – one of the terpenes in saffron. The term for turpentine trees, *terminthos*, probably stems from the Aegean, more specifically Minoan Crete on the cusp of the second millennium BCE. Such knowledge could have been at least partly behind the cultivation of saffron in Thera (Ferrence & Bendersky 2004, 216-218).

The use of saffron as a contraceptive or to induce abortion is unlikely to have been a particularly fool-proof method, but would certainly have helped women to gain some control over their fertility. Its use would have had a number of spin-offs. Being able to plan childbirth to a certain extent would not just have given women power over the future population, but would also have freed them to operate without the physical disadvantages of pregnancy, lactation etc. It would also have given them a psychological emancipation based on their liberated physical freedom to explore what in other cultures, were held to be spheres of male influence. Thus, rather than the appearance of crocuses in frescoes signalling fertility and regeneration, it might well have had rather different connotations i.e. the control of fertility in a more down-to-earth way – not as a celebration of the fecundity of the realm of the goddess.

3.5 The Silk Connection

A well-preserved cocoon was recently discovered in excavations east of the House of the Ladies at Akrotiri. It has been identified as being most likely *Pachypasa otus* which commonly feeds off cypress, oaks (particularly downy oak) and juniper. Silk was obtained from *Pachypasa otus* in parts of the Levant until the eighteenth century CE. However, the alternative possibility, *Saturnia pyri*, has not been completely ruled out which would widen the caterpillars' feeding options considerably as they are content with a much wider range of trees. Doubts have been cast over the availability of these trees on Thera, as it is usually considered to have been lacking significant tree cover. However, a recent study on wood charcoal remains at the Akrotiri site shows that the island was not as barren as hitherto thought: all of the above-mentioned trees were certainly present throughout the entire Bronze Age (Asouti 2003, 481-482). This scenario would tie in very well with the textile theme which seems to have had great importance on Thera (testified to by numerous loom weights discovered on the site). Although this one cocoon is not sufficient to claim the existence of

large-scale silk production at Akrotiri, there is other evidence for its possible significance (Panagiotakopulu et. al. 1997 420-421; Morgan 2000, 591).

The central figure in Xeste 3, the so-called “goddess” wears diaphanous clothing as do the “Adorants” (robes/blouses and a veil) and all are decorated with crocuses or references to the yellow flower/red stamens. One of the older women also wears a transparent blouse (Rehak 2004, 87-91; Doulas 1992, pls. 100-108). Other women in Minoan wall paintings are also depicted wear diaphanous blouses and open boleros. These items of clothing could possibly be wild silk (Panagiotakopulu et. al. 1997, 426).

There is also a connection between silk and the somewhat, uncharacteristic militaristic nature of parts of the miniature frieze decorating room 5 of the West House at Akrotiri. Weapons are



**Fig. 14: “Warrior Goddess”
from Knossos.**

carried, ships are wrecked, men are drowned, and spears, helmets and shields are featured onboard ships. Silk has also other properties rather than the purely decorative. It was used in undergarments by the Mongols under their armour: the fabric hindered the piercing force of projectiles (Panagiotakopulu et. al.1997, 428). It is interesting that the woman brandishing a sword on a LM I seal from Knossos (Fig. 14), commonly referred to as a “warrior goddess” (it is obviously not a very lady-like pose for a mortal female) appears to be wearing a transparent cloak. Could this be

another example of silk, with a strong link to martial pursuits and women? Textiles, as an integral part of armour, might have had an additional value on the international market.

Silk must have been an exotically rare and valuable product in the Bronze Age Mediterranean. The people who controlled its production and distribution would very likely have amassed riches and prestige-associated power. If, as probable from pictorial evidence, women were heavily involved with plants (especially saffron) and their by-products, then silk must have passed through their hands at some, if not all, stages of its lifecycle.

3.6 Tree Shakers and Transport: Is Nothing Sacred?

“Butterflies” are quite commonly depicted on LM I and Mycenaean seals. They have also been linked to “chrysalises” appearing in the same scenes, for example on the Archanes ring (Fig. 15) (Warren 1987, 489-50; Pini 1998, 3-5). This ring combines these two motifs plus a man shaking a tree. The so-called “tree shaking”

scenes, depicted on a number of seals, are invariably interpreted as religious. Although the exact nature of the ritual is debated, the general idea behind it is similar: tugging and shaking these trees in some way attracted the attention of a divine being (Herva 2006a, 591). The life cycle of insects has led Nanno



Fig. 15: The Archanes Ring

Marinatos (1993, 195) to speculate that the

“butterflies” and dragonflies which also often appear alongside chrysalis-like shapes, are featured in these tree-shaking scenes due to their characteristics of transformation/regeneration. However, an alternative explanation could be that these tree-shaking rituals might rather be representations of collecting cocoons from the wild: the shaking dislodges them from the tree (Panagiotakopulu et. al. 1997, 425). This does not necessarily mean that the process did not ultimately attain cultic status, but rather that it might have its roots in silk production.

A “butterfly” cut on a gemstone from Knossos has identifiable features that indicate it is a moth rather than a butterfly. Such an image also occurs on a on a lightweight gold balance from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae. This has been suggested as depicting the symbolic weighing of souls, or more prosaically, weighing currency. However, due to the delicacy of the balance, it was more likely to have been used to weigh something light – silk thread for example (Cain 2001, 33; Panagiotakopulu et. al. 1997, 423-424).

Drawing together the silk and saffron strands, crocuses and butterflies (or moths) are linked at Akrotiri in a marine (trading?) context. Ships 1 and 2 depicted on the miniature frieze in room 5 of the West House bear moths (or butterflies) on their prows and in the case of ship 2, two more on the mast. Ship 2 is generally considered to be the flagship due to the power symbols associated with it such as boars tusk helmets and *waz* lilies (Panagiotakopulu et. al. 1997, 426). Crocus blooms are also painted on the hull of the sailing ship and crocus-shaped

pendants hang from a double row of festoons decorating the flagship. In its “festoon and pendant” form, the crocus motif first emerges on pottery combined with marine elements in LM IB, as seen on the Tyliossos amphora. Pictographic signs depict most frequently the most commonly cultivated plants: wheat, barley, olives and saffron. The crocus is featured on a number of sealings discovered in the Hieroglyphic Deposit at Knossos, as are olives, bees *and* ships. This could be representing the product along with the transportation employed in trading the items (Morgan 1988, 30-31). The connection between saffron and ships is clearly echoed in the West House. Thus the stylised crocus pendants hanging from the rigging and their repetition on the hull and prows form a connection with overseas trade, silk, the processing of textiles (dyed with saffron) and all other crocus-based by-products and by extension, women.

3.7 Evidence for Minoan Trade in Cloth, Saffron and Perfume

Doumas (1983, 120) suggests that Thera would very likely have traded in perishables which are no longer traceable e.g. saffron, wine and honey. This gains some support from the Uluburun wreck off the Turkish coast. Although not directly connected to Minoan Crete and postdating the Neopalatial period in Crete by almost 200 years (ca. 1300 BCE), the ship shows that plants were a part of the cargo. As yet no saffron has been discovered, but this could be due to its fragility, making survival in the archaeological record unlikely (Forsyth 2000, b). Linear B tablets record the manufacture of textiles and perfumed oils and archaeological data in the form of containers attest to oil and unguents travelling by their thousands to Cyprus, Egypt and the Levant. An Akkadian text tells of a merchant called Sinaranu who was granted duty-free status on grain, a fermented beverage and oil that he had imported from Crete (Knapp 1991, 21, 37 & 44).

Around 80% of medicinal plants mentioned in ancient Egyptian medical papyri have so far been identified with certainty. It has been postulated that *djaret* is a likely candidate for saffron: their applications appear to be very similar (not least for the treatment of eye conditions). It appears seven times in the very fragmentary *London Papyrus* dating to around 1300 BCE, which also seems to be dealing with eye diseases. What makes this particularly interesting is that in association with one of its occurrences there is a reference to the Keftiu (generally thought to be the Egyptian term for the Minoans) (Forsyth 2000, b).

Archaeological and literary sources show that contact between Egypt and the Minoans flourished during the Middle Minoan and Late Minoan periods (although the parallel chronology between the two countries is uncertain and hotly debated). Egyptian tomb paintings dated to the Late Minoan era, show men in Aegean-style clothing bearing Aegean-style vessels presumably as gifts, tribute or perhaps trade goods to various Egyptian rulers. Tombs also feature wall and ceiling decorations which appear to be direct copies of Aegean textile motifs indicating that textiles were almost certainly imported from the Aegean (Barber 1991, 330-357). Although the nature of the other goods is unknown, they must surely have been valuable enough to warrant their presentation or exchange and it is not inconceivable that saffron and fabrics (silk?) dyed with saffron were among them.

3.8 Summary of Chapter 3

Even in Bronze Age cultures which had men in most major offices of authority, women could still hold positions of considerable power and economic worth. They could and did trade, negotiate financial transactions, write and become physicians. There appears to be nothing in the archaeological record which indicates a thriving merchant class was a male preserve. In fact, there seems to be some evidence that trade might have had some affiliation with women. Hair-coils (or currency) and weighting tools which are found in wealthy graves do not seem to be restricted to one sex or the other. Weights can be difficult to differentiate from spindle whorls. If a number of spindle whorls (usually assumed to be the preserve of women) are re-categorised as weights, or as components of a crude form of abacus, then their connection with women cannot just be dismissed as another anomaly in the expectations we have for gendered tasks. Will the so-called women's areas of the house (due to the presence of spindle whorls), have to be re-gendered, or does this call for a more open mind towards what can be considered suitable occupations for males and females? Although these insights are made through analogy with other Bronze Age Near Eastern cultures, they could be even more striking in the Minoan world where there is evidence that the traditional interplay between the sexes might have been rather different.

Minoan women seem to have had strong connections with the crocus flower and thus saffron. The motif in its varying forms, from stigma and colour through to the bloom itself, recurs repeatedly with either portrayals of females or by association. Few would deny that saffron must have been an important prestige item, valued as a trading commodity for whatever

purpose it was put to use: and these purposes seemed to have been myriad. It was esteemed for its pharmaceutical qualities as well having more tangible benefits as an ingredient in perfume and a colouring agent. If, in addition, it was used to colour a luxury product such as silk, this would have been an added bonus.

It would seem logical that if women are clearly associated with crocuses and by extension their by-products, then it is likely that they played a significant role in their production and distribution: not least in some form of supervisory character. It is of course not impossible that this role was limited to ceremonies and rituals, however, in the absence of proof of this, assumptions about the role of women being limited in the commercial field should be suspended and other angles investigated.

A number of common Minoan motifs with links to women and their power disappeared with Mycenaean ascendancy. Depictions of women with quadrupeds do not retain their popularity; the monkey no longer appears in wall paintings or glyptic; and crocus decoration both on clothing and pottery also virtually vanishes. In addition, the textiles used to make women's dresses become plainer whilst men's clothing becomes correspondingly more ornate. The Mycenaeans seem to have had different priorities from the Minoans. These differences could reflect a contrasting attitude towards the sexes: women may have begun to lose their supremacy.

CHAPTER 4: WHEN IS A GODDESS NOT A GODDESS?

Art and objects do not just passively reflect ideas and messages, but react back on the practices that instigated them and can influence gender relations and attitudes connected to the “manipulation and sensory perception of particular forms”. They are also part of a network of objects in which relationships are formed which affect their significance (Alberti, 2001, 194). Images of power, both literally and metaphorically, would have reinforced and been instrumental in perpetrating the social order.

4.1 Xeste 3: Proposed “Upgrade”: From Goddess to V.I.P

With this in mind I suggest that the upper register in Xeste 3 might not depict a goddess, but rather another type of V.I.P: a ruler, a controller of elite products, a merchant trader. All these spheres of influence were likely interconnected and to try and differentiate between them might be making modern distinctions which would have had very little relevance to the Minoans (or the Therans). But, they are all positions of power which might not [necessarily] have been dependent on the supernatural: at least not in a purely “religious” sense. She displays the accoutrements of her status and spheres of influence in the form of saffron, textiles, balance weights, maybe even fertility (in medical terms rather than the bountiful mother and nurturer of numerous offspring). She surrounds herself with signs of power and protection. She is presented with both the reality and symbols of her authority: saffron. A parallel might be found in the UR III era (ca. 2100-2000) in Mesopotamia, where most seals depict a “presentation scene”: a seated deity is confronted by a standing figure. However, a variation on the theme crops up sometime during this period. The deity is replaced by another figure, generally recognised as a ruler who sometimes appropriates attributes of the god. Irene Winter (1986 253-265) argues that this juxtaposition of seated king and god emphasises the fluidity of the borders between the sacred and profane: the gap is bridged by his divine election and his personal gifts. This could have a resonance in the scene depicted in Xeste 3: our V.I.P. is appropriating the trappings of divinity in a similar way. Rather than ruling her realm of fertility, she supervises much more down-to-earth activities. However, to what extent she is appropriating divine protection or approval might be almost irrelevant if the borders between the sacred and profane and reality and fantasy were rather fluid.

This need not necessarily negate the interpretation of the lower register as an initiation scene. It is often difficult to differentiate between political and/or religious practices or rites and if

actions of a ritual nature *are* recognised, they can easily be mistakenly identified as religious when they are completely secular in nature: offerings and worship can be made to both mortal and immortal beings alike, particularly to individuals of high status (Renfrew 1985, 20). Thus, echoes might be found in the English debutant ritual (now defunct) where a girl declared herself adult and marriageable by being presented to the reigning monarch. Or perhaps, more like its counterpart in the United States, where young women are formally presented to an established member of elite society. These debutantes are usually recommended by a committee or sponsored by an established member of elite society. The initiation rituals could have been carried out as suggested on the ground floor and culminated with being presented to the V.I.P upstairs.

4.1.1 The Necklace: The Evidence

Around her neck are two necklaces (Fig. 16): one of alternating gold, blue and red ducks - generally assumed to be gold, silver and carnelian - the other of gold and blue dragonflies or butterflies (or moths?), which are likewise interpreted as gold and silver (Konstantinidi 2001,



Fig. 16: The “Goddess” from Xeste 3 and her Necklaces

241). Nanno Marinatos (1984, 70) views these necklaces as part of the role of the “goddess” as a mistress of nature. This she links with their marshland habitat and thus to fertility, by analogy with Egypt, where wetlands signify abundance and fecundity. Although, it is perhaps appropriate here to point out that Janice Crowley (1995, 489) has analysed images of power in the Bronze Age Aegean and concluded that even when she believes there is a case for identifying a figure as a

divinity, “obvious fertility images are virtually non-existent. There is no extended use of phallic or vulva symbols, no obvious display of nakedness and no widespread use of mother and child groups”. For a culture supposed to have a preoccupation with fertility, attested to by the “goddess” it is somewhat surprising that there is a complete lack of iconography linking women with motherhood and childbirth. The Minoan world rather emphasises “the social

rather than the biological, the public rather than the domestic". Thus in attempts to place a mother goddess/fertility goddess in a central role in Minoan iconography, it should be borne in mind that "there is simply no evidence for the celebration of motherhood, divine or human among the Minoans". In contrast, motherhood was seemingly accorded a more central role in Mycenaean circles where numerous female figurines cradle infants (from LM II onwards). However, it must be mentioned that even in Mycenaean Crete nurturing imagery is extremely rare (Olsen, 1998, 390). This appears to be another instance of a different attitude towards women in Mycenaean circles. Although, it would seem that the lack of interest on the part of the Minoans in depicting scenes of motherhood persisted after LM I.

However, a fertility aspect might be present in the frescoes, but with a slightly different twist. In Egypt nature scenes are indicative of abundant life provided by the beneficence of the sun god. Nature and power go hand in hand and allude to rulers and their office. Fecundity was granted by the sun god and the king was the god's representative on earth (Morgan 2000, 527). With this reasoning, the "goddess" could be rather a ruler than an "out-and-out" divine being.

There could also be some uncertainty over whether the latter necklace depicts dragonflies or some other winged insect. When Spyridon Marinatos (1976, 33) first unearthed the fresco fragments, he thought they were probably bees. Nanno Marinatos (1984, 48-49) seems to have been the first to "see" dragonflies ... "I have identified the latter as dragonflies". There now seems to be a general consensus that this is the case, even though the shape of the wing tips is incorrect: they are pointed when they should be rounded (Harte 2000, 688). Although Robert Laffineur (2000, 900-901) often refers to the insects as dragonflies, he also describes the necklace as "consisting of a yellow string from which blue and yellow butterfly-shaped beads are suspended".

But even more distressing for the necklace, is Kenneth Harte's (2000, 688) identification of the ducks as European shags. He reasons that although the colours (gold, blue and red) are obviously not true to life, the shag's true colours would be too dull for a "goddess". One reaction to this is worth noting as it illustrates the often circular nature of goddess recognition: "The individual wearing that necklace may, by virtue of her identity in cult, be less likely to be wearing an undomesticated bird, such as a shag, than a domesticated bird. In fact, one might want to work the other way around: into her identity and then through her identity to

the species of bird that she is wearing” (Winter 2000, 697-698). By assuming that the lady is a goddess, a circular argument develops: establishing her identity as a goddess helps to establish her attributes, which have been used in the first instance to identify her as a divinity.

4.1.2 The Necklace Reinterpreted: Duck Weights...

When considering the necklaces worn by the “goddess” I shall come down on the side of ducks and dragonflies. As this seems to be the commonly held opinion, it is perhaps interesting to make connections which are not, as is usually the case, necessarily linked with the wearer’s divinity. If we can assume that a significant amount of Minoan/Theran trade was conducted in the Near East and Egypt, then referring to the duck shape might have had many connotations. It has been suggested that ducks in Egypt were closely connected to female sexuality (Manniche 1987, 40). Even if the Minoans recognised the Egyptian connection between ducks and female sexuality, this motif might have been used as a multi-layered symbol: power, trade, the dominant sex/gender *and* a reference to female control over their own fertility/sexuality.

Duck weights are ubiquitous in the Mesopotamian archaeological record and are often carved from semi-precious stones (Foster 2003, 360; Pulak 1996, 144). If such seemingly ordinary instruments like the “rod and ring” (see Chapter 3.3.1 above) could be symbols of power, then so could other tools of trade such as weights. The duck pendants, for example, might be referring to the common Near Eastern balance weight: symbolising the lady’s connection with trade, exotica and influential contacts abroad. Rather than referring to her realm of fertility, the “goddess’s” necklace might be displaying the tools and/or symbols of her power and wealth.

Although duck and/or animal weights are rare in the Aegean, this lack of zoomorphic weights in general is quite likely due to the fact that there seems to have been a standardised measuring system practiced solely in the Minoan world: weights tended to be disc-shaped (Michailidou 2001, 55 & 64). This having been said, two small, duck-shaped stones have been unearthed at Palaikastro, (which are presumed to be beads but could conceivably be weights or both) as well as another un-pierced one with unknown provenience, but also found in eastern Crete (Hafford 2001, 346). Evans believed that he had found 3 duck weights made of carnelian at Knossos but Pulak (1996, 9) believes they were probably beads as they were very light – under 2.6 g. But, this weight does not seem out of proportion if it was used to weigh

something very light like saffron. These weights must have been widely recognised in the Near East and even though not conforming to the Aegean standard, could easily have been appreciated by Minoan spectators for their exotic connections and symbolic significance of the measuring of luxury products. Akrotiri seems to have been the hub of significant trading activity. It is notable that many lead weights have been discovered at the site (as well as a few possible stone weights) and it is also one of the few places in the Aegean in which balance pans have been found (Hafford 2001, 324).

A LM III tomb was found at Rethymnon in western Crete containing amongst other items, two scale pans, earrings, two whorls, a cylinder seal, a seal, a mirror, scales and beads. The more than 400 beads plus a number of bronze objects have led the excavators to suggest that the tomb contained an important female¹² – maybe a priestess. Hafford believes that these items could be a merchant assemblage, although he admits it has proven more difficult to locate a specific set of merchant tools in the Aegean than in the Near East. In the Minoan region, two such assemblages come from Akrotiri (LM IA) and the others from Pankalochori (LM III), Katsambas (LM IA) and Mavro Spelio (MM II- LM IIIB). It is interesting that where he does believe he has located groupings of artefacts which could indicate the presence of a merchant, these burials often contain Near Eastern weights, seals or other characteristics (Hafford 2001, 326, 348-349). Weights in the Near East also tended to be standardized – duck-shaped weights being a case in point – and this allowed them and their use to be easily recognised (Michailidou 2001, 55). This reference to the Near East could have been reiterated in Aegean iconography. If a specific merchant class was more common outside the Minoan world, establishing one's status as a business person of means and influence, would quite possibly have involved the use of references, symbolically connected to areas known for these activities.

The duck is also an Egyptian hieroglyph which can mean “son” or if accompanied by the feminine signifier, “daughter”. It is often coupled with the words “of re” to refer to a pharaoh (Davies 1987, 40-44; Collier & Manley 1998, 70). This could indicate that the word “duck” had certain connotations of power. The Egyptians were very fond of playing with “nuances of words and meaning and in the sounds and images of the language” (Foster 2001, xiv). The “duck” sign must have lent itself to such a game and would likely have acquired some form of

¹² The skeleton has been securely sexed by a bone specialist (Baxévani-Kouzioni & Markoulaki 1996, 646).

duality of meaning. The use of such a symbol, by the “goddess” might therefore not necessarily refer to the divine fertility of the wearer, but could rather signal an appropriation of the power.

If the ducks are in fact shags, then while it might weaken my hypothesis presented above (i.e. that they could be duck weights), a number of known weights *are* of unspecified water birds which could conceivably be shags (Fig. 17). It is not so easy to spot Minoan symbolism in the less symbolic shag, although they are used

in Christian heraldry to represent sea-power as in the arms of Liverpool (Rothery 1986, 56). But shags have historically been trained to fish. The earliest known reference to this is in the Chinese Annals of the Sui Dynasty (589-618 CE). The technique is still practiced in Japan today (Inoue-Murayama



Fig. 17: A shag (left) and a bronze weight in the shape of an unidentified water fowl (right) from the Uluburun shipwreck

et. al. 2002, 417). Could shags therefore have some significance? They might have been used in a similar way as aristocrats used hawks/falcons to hunt. The shag could then have become a status symbol indicating membership of an exclusive “club”.

4.1.3 ... and Dragonflies

If they *are* dragonflies depicted and they were indigenous, then standing water must have existed on Thera which would mean that the environment would have been much wetter than it is today. This is apparently likely: recent studies show that the island had a relatively moist and cool climate (Asouti 2003, 471; Harte 2000, 688). Their marshy breeding grounds could also have been habitats for the malaria-carrying mosquito (Arnott & Stuckey 2003, 209-214). In such environments, dragonflies are valued for keeping the mosquito populations down (Arnold 1995, 31) and might thus have had a connection with women’s role in controlling the health of the community, not just the trade. Egyptian rulers had the “hook and flail” as a symbol of office. They were probably originally shepherd’s tools: the hook was used to guide, catch and rescue sheep and the flail was used as a whip and a fly-whisk (Lurker 1980, 52). In Egypt the fly was not just a pest, but was also greatly admired for its tenacity and aggressive behaviour. A golden fly was presented to soldiers for exhibiting exceptional bravery (Scott 1956, 92). They were also featured in amulets, although it is often difficult to be sure that a fly was intended: a green and white jasper insect (Fig. 18) resembles a mosquito more than a

fly. Not only that, but it has a falcon head sporting the double crown of Upper and Lower



Fig. 18: Egyptian Amulet: a Mosquito/Fly(?) with a Falcon Head

Egypt (Arnold 1995, 48) The mosquito might have had a similar role on Thera as the fly did in Egypt (and possibly the mosquito as well?): they are certainly persistent and aggressive. They are also dragonfly fodder. Could dragonflies have come to symbolise a ruler's protection of her "flock"? If on the other hand they are in fact "butterfly-shaped" (Laffineur 2000, 900), then it is not an enormous leap of faith to turn the butterflies into moths in the same way as Panagiotakopulu has suggested for other butterfly depictions, based on the discovery of the silk moth cocoon at Akrotiri (see Chapter 3.6 above).

However, when interpreting the attributes of the "goddess" (and other aspects of Minoan/Theran frescoes) disputes over which species are represented make this uphill work. This dissention has been discussed above in Chapters 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 and is accorded a significant amount of space in the volumes published after the First International Symposium on the wall paintings of Thera (Warren & Nomikos 2000, 545-744). In the words of Peter Warren (2000, 737): "If we haven't done our best to identify species as precisely as possible, then we can't go on to talk about symbolism or intention".

4.1.4 Monkeys and Griffins

Two exotic animals, a monkey and a griffin, flank the "goddess" supposedly symbolically establishing the divine status of the seated woman (the monkey acting as an intermediary between the humans and the goddess) (Marinatos 1984, 61-62 & 1987a, 124). However, in Aegean wall paintings, monkeys are depicted in both "secular" and "religious" occupations. Out of the four scenes at Akrotiri which depict monkeys, three show them engaged in human activities (Angelopoulou 2000, 551). At Knossos, in the Saffron Gatherers fresco, a monkey gathers crocus flowers. It is possible that monkeys may have assisted in the real task of harvesting, as is depicted on Egyptian wall paintings (Shaw 1993, 672 & 675). If monkeys were actually present on Thera, then they must have been imported. It is possible, therefore, that their status as exotic, expensive luxuries, lay, at least in part, behind their depictions (Michailidou 2000, 739). Any individual who could import monkeys must have had wealth and international connections. This can be attested to in Mesopotamia. A new status symbol appeared in the 3rd millennium BCE when King Ibbi-Sin of Ur was given a monkey as a gift.

It started a new trend in which rulers had themselves depicted with monkeys (Collon 2000, 527).

As I have attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 2.5 above, griffins can be both symbols and guardians of V.I.P.'s (rulers or priests for example) and are not necessarily an exclusively divine attribute. There is the possibility that they were even believed to have existed: albeit in a nebulous region far removed from the scene of every day Minoan life. In addition, the real and the fantastic might not have been considered as being on two completely different planes. Based on this interpretation of reality, both the griffin and the monkey could be relating to the woman in a way that does not require her to be a goddess but as part of the inseparable realms which constituted their world.

4.1.5 Seating Fit for a “Goddess”

The “goddess” is seated on a stepped, openwork platform. Such platforms have been linked to cult practices. Krattenmaker (1995, 125-125), as mentioned in Chapter 2.6 above in a slightly different context, infers their cultic status by comparison with a winged, bird-headed figure seated on a similar platform. In addition to the argument that there could be other explanations for the appearance of the “bird woman” (i.e. she might not have been considered to be so incredible to the Minoans, or she might be wearing a mask), other factors also come into play. Maria Shaw (1986, 119-121) draws parallels between the Throne Room at Knossos and the seating arrangements of the Xeste 3 “goddess”. She demonstrates that the incurved “altar-supports” which are featured below (presumably supporting?) the structure in Xeste 3, are similar to those appearing in the dado on either side of the throne at Knossos. Shaw points out that the only thing missing is the goddess or priestess on the Knossian throne. However she believes à la Reusch and Niemeier (see Chapter 2.5 above) that the griffins flanking the throne signal her imminent appearance. However, if the throne is occupied by a queen rather than a priestess imitating a goddess, then the implication could be rather different.

4.1.6 Saffron, Silk and Ships

In Chapter 3.6 above, I endeavoured to forge interrelationships between the motifs on the ships depicted on the walls of the West House, silk, saffron, Xeste 3 and women. Opinions fluctuate over the nature of the West House, but most scholars (including the current excavator, Christos Doumas) now believe that it was a private residence occupied by an influential person, probably connected to the flagship” (Cain 1997, 178-179). Xeste 3, on the

other hand, is often considered sacred and thus the paintings deemed to have some religious significance. But, Doumas (1983, 76-77) is more cautious. He considers the less exalted possibility of the owner of Xeste 3 being a “merchant involved in the collection and/or distribution of saffron, in which case the paintings may depict mundane activities (albeit in a rather stylized way for artistic effect)”. Thus the fleet on the miniature fresco could have been owned by a female V.I.P.: the owner of the West House or the seated figure in Xeste 3, who might conceivably be one and the same person. If Xeste 3 *is* of a more public nature then it is possible that the West House was her private residence and Xeste 3 where she performed her official duties. The fleet could have been trading in saffron, silk and other prestige items: allusions to these goods were depicted on her ships.

In Mesopotamia textiles and metals were controlled by the palace-temple authorities. As precious metals were lacking, these had to be imported from Anatolia, Oman and Iran and distribution of these items was strictly controlled. It is possible that the Minoans, who also did not have “home grown” metal sources, might have exerted a similar form of control over textile technologies such as dyeing (with saffron?) and other prestige items. These could have been exchanged for, among other products, metals from the Near East (Burke 1998, 280-281). The “goddess” might be hinting at her control over textiles. She is seated on a rounded “seat” placed on top of a tripartite/stepped structure. This seat has been variously identified as a pile of cushions, bales of dyed cloth (Rehak 1995, 105) or a stool (Marinatos 1987a, 124). If, as Paul Rehak suggests, she is sitting on bales of dyed cloth, then it is not difficult to make a connection between this and her role as a trader or controller of trade. Prominently displaying a prestigious item of production would “round out the picture”.

4.2 The Mochlos Ring: An Alternative Interpretation

In the case of the Mochlos ring, I would like to offer an alternative explanation, based partly on a number of the more general observations made in Chapters 2 and 3 above which laid the foundations for a de-deification of the “goddess” of Xeste 3 and partly on more specific observations. Although the figure is not securely sexed, I shall go along with the commonly-held assumption that it is female in order to attempt to make a case for a less divine interpretation. It is interesting to note in this context however, that the identification of the person as a woman, might be part of the circular scenario which seems to appear when allocating immortality: the scene has been designated as cultic, due to the nature of the boat,

thus the figure onboard is more likely to be a goddess than a god as sacred = female and profane = male. Once the figure is established as female, then the boat might assume even more cultic proportions. Minoans might not have been so bound by these binary categories: male/female and sacred/profane (see Chapter 2.3 above). In any case, a woman should not have to be relegated to the sacred sphere to make her power acceptable. A man in a boat/ship is immediately recognised as the captain or at the very least a sailor: for example in the Miniature Fresco in the West House at Akrotiri (Marinatos 1995a, 39). But, when searching for evidence of merchants in the Aegean, it was discovered that most pictures have women onboard. They have therefore been dismissed: "...they are presumably religious" (Weingarten 1999, 354). I would like to suggest that the ring might be rather more prosaic but with a hint of mythic content.

Discovering that one silk cocoon at Akrotiri (see Chapter 3.5 above) was due to both chance and the fact that Akrotiri was the first site to employ insect specialists. Therefore, it is not only likely that more are to be found on Thera, but it is also possible that similar evidence is awaiting discovery in Crete. With this in mind, I see a female figure on a boat transporting towards the shore, what could possibly be a representation of a tree¹³ which had acquired hallowed status as the "home" of the silk cocoon (a representation of which hovers above). The "sacred tree" might be a reference to, or celebration of, transporting these trees either to Minoan shores from abroad, or from place to place within Crete. This could have become the stuff of legends, but this does not necessarily preclude the involvement of a mortal woman rather than a goddess: a female equivalent of the Greek hero – a heroine in true Minoan style. Although, this is clearly fanciful, as we have only one cocoon (so far), there could be other explanations along similar lines which would also account for the depiction. For example, Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt (1977, 47), suggests that the woman on the ring may have been "a merchant prince trading in timber". The discovery of such a ring at Mochlos would therefore make sense as it was clearly a centre of shipping and commerce due to its natural harbour from which trade was conducted throughout the Aegean and probably to the Near East (Soles & Davaras 1992, 417).

¹³ I shall follow in the footsteps of Evans, S. Marinatos, Glotz, Nilsson and Sourvinou-Inwood and place the tree onboard, rather than on the shore (Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 151).

4.2.1 The “Sacred Tree”, “Divine Boat” and the Silk Connection

The term “sacred tree” is used widely and loosely to refer to any possibly related phenomenon within the Near East and Aegean. Mesopotamian art, for example, bears depictions of trees, boughs and flower sprays from the very earliest periods of the history of the region (Crowley 1989, 64). It was Arthur Evans who first placed the sacred tree in a central position within the context of Minoan and Mycenaean religion and this notion is still widely accepted (Nilsson 1971, 262). This has helped to identify the Mochlos ring as cultic: “Behind her [the goddess], towards the prow of the vessel, is a small double shrine from which rises a sacred tree” (Evans 1935, 952). In spite of reservations over the sacred aspects of the tree, it could be considered to have cultic connotations if silk production and/or trade in luxury objects were held in such high esteem and worthy of reverence and protection (divine or otherwise).

One of the floating objects depicted on this ring has been identified (with apparent certainty) by Spyridon Marinatos (1933, 224) as a chrysalis. He maintains that it confirmed the otherworldly nature of the scene. This identification gains cautious support from a number of scholars (e.g. Marinatos 1993, 163, Wedde 1992, 197; Cain 2001, 35). It is otherwise often referred to, as mentioned above in the description of the ring (Chapter 1.2.2) as a “sacred heart”, or almost anything. Although there are apparent differences and uncertainties as to what this and the other objects mean, they are generally (plus other floating motifs which often appear on various glyptic scenes, such as the eye, branch, “pillar” and “ear”) taken to denote these scenes as religious (Cain 2001, 36). However, if the object is a chrysalis, then it could be a silk cocoon as has been suggested earlier, where it often occurs in a “tree shaking” glyptic depiction (see Chapter 3.6 above).

The boat often appears to have been placed in the religious realm due to its animal shaped-prow which is reminiscent of the “divine boats” featured in Egyptian and Near Eastern religious scenes. In Egypt in particular, the animal-headed prows are often turned inwards like on the Mochlos ring (Persson 1942, 85; Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 152-153). Marinatos 1993, 163-164) believes the ship itself is shaped like a dragon and thus must be a form of divine transport, although it is not completely clear whether this would be the case if it was shaped like a bird (or another less fantastic creature) rather than her postulated dragon. Based on analogy with the Mochlos ring she suggests that a ring from Agia Triadha might also be a goddess, but as the sex of the figure is ambiguous, has left the question open. However,

Michael Wedde (1990, 6) sees the complete hull of the boat found at Agia Triadha as “shaped like a bird with clearly distinguishable tail feathers” and Evans (1935, 952) has the barge on the Mochlos ring finished off with a fish-tailed stern. But, some of these vessels (on the Mochlos ring in particular) might not be quite as unrealistic as is generally supposed: the “tails” could rather be perfectly ordinary depictions of ships made of bark or reeds (Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 152).

Having a prow (or a stern) or a figurehead in the form of an animal, fantastic or otherwise, does not necessarily have to indicate an otherworldly vessel: the ships featured in the West House frescoes are a case in point. The sterns feature animal figureheads: lions and griffins (Morgan 1988, 134). The skaldic poems refer to dragon ships with prows carved as dragon heads. The Viking ships depicted on the 11th century Bayeux tapestry have animal (dragon) headed prows and feature various real and mythical beasts cavorting in a strip underneath the ships (Brøgger & Shetelig 1971, 135, 164-165). Another feature that these ships share with the Mochlos ring is the inwardly turned prow (Fig. 19). This mixing of the real and the fantastic does not hinder the tapestry being interpreted as depicting a very worldly Norman invasion of England.



Fig 19: The Bayeux Tapestry. Backward Facing Animal Prows and Fantastical Animals Cavorting Underneath.

4.2.2 Rings as Status Symbols: A Female Prerogative?

Over 4,500 sealings have been recovered from the Bronze Age Aegean but only 15%, or about 675 items depict the human figure. Out of these 675 impressions, about one-third, or ca. 225 pieces were engraved on metal (mainly gold) rings between 1600 and 1400 BCE.

Without textual backup, it cannot be definitively ascertained who used these rings/seals and what purpose they served, but one can reasonably assume that they might have been designed to denote ownership or as symbols of office/authority as was the case for the Near Eastern cylinder seals and Egyptian signet rings (Cain 2001, 27-28).

The hoops on Minoan signet rings are usually very small: many around 1.3 cm in internal diameter. Although this was initially taken as an indication that they were not meant to be worn on the finger, that theory has now been discarded. The varying sizes of the hoops indicate that they were made specifically to fit a certain finger and many of them show signs of use. Also, they are oval in shape, a shape that corresponds better to the actual form of a finger than the round rings now produced. Although 1.3 cm in diameter *is* small, rings today exist in this sizing and are purchased and used by finely-boned women. The Mochlos ring has a diameter of around 1.15 cm. Skeletal evidence, although rare from the Neopalatial period, suggests that Minoans were of slighter build than people today and thus a 1.3 cm hoop could have been worn by a Minoan woman of average size, making it a reasonable assumption that 1.15 cm could be used by a slim person after the standards of the time. As it appears to be probable that fine signet rings would have been worn by high-ranking members of society, this could certainly indicate that women were over-represented in the upper echelons. It is also interesting to note that Mycenaean rings in general, have a considerably larger diameter than their Minoan counterparts, often more than 1.6 cm (Müller 2005, 171-176; Krzyszkowska 2005, 128-130, 154). This again accords with what may have been a different attitude in Mycenaean society towards women and men, supported by a number of observations recorded above (see Chapters 3.3 and 3.4). Mycenaean signet rings seem to have been sized to fit larger members of society: probably males. But, the small sizing of our ring lends support to the idea that it was worn by a woman of not inconsiderable status¹⁴: a woman who might be declaring her illustrious heritage (either directly or indirectly) connected to the introduction and continued association with elite products and power.

4.3 Summary of Chapter 4

The Xeste 3 “goddess” is unequivocally a V.I.P. However, her status as a goddess rests on a number of aspects which can also be explained by her being an important person within the temporal world. Her elevation, both physically and figuratively, is explicable if she is revered

¹⁴ It is considered unlikely that children wore gold rings (Müller 2005, 172).

(or would like to see herself revered). Any interpretation of her necklace depends on the identification of the species involved and also on whether one agrees that women belonged (and have always done so) within the realm of fertility based on her reproductive capacities. However, the fertility aspect does not have to be completely discarded on this basis. The iconography might have been alluding to the Egyptian concept of nature and power going hand in hand: granted by divinity but manifested in the ruler.

The symbolic nature of many of her attributes does not necessarily serve as proof of her divinity. If such seemingly ordinary instruments like the “rod and ring” can be symbols of power, then so too could other tools of trade such as weights. The duck pendants, for example, might rather be referring to the common Near Eastern balance weight: symbolising her connection with trade, exotica and influential contacts abroad.

The Mochlos ring features a figure, which although not securely sexed, is also generally believed to be a “goddess”. As is the case for the Xeste 3 “goddess”, there is considerable disagreement over the identification of a number of objects, which could be critical for identifying her as divine or otherwise: not least the “divine barge” and the floating objects. Her sex seems to have been initially inferred by Seager due to the “cultic” nature of the scene (see Chapter 1.2.2.). Then, once a female has been identified, the scene is more likely than not to be cultic... It is also interesting that hoops on Minoan signet rings are generally very small. It is tempting to assume that they were therefore worn by women: it is certainly true that whoever wore them must have had very slim fingers. If this fact is coupled with the likely theory that such items would have been indicative of some form of status, then this becomes even more significant. The scenes on these rings must have meant something to the owners and their imprints would seemingly have been recognised by others. Depicting one-self or another being engaged in something relevant to one’s own sphere of interests would serve to reinforce that occupation. Thus, I have suggested that the ring could be depicting an event, either carried out by a real woman standing in for the original “importer”, or a mythical, generic scene: a secular or semi-secular interpretation of the Mochlos ring.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: THE DENOUEMENT

It is beyond dispute that Arthur Evans has been enormously influential in all ensuing interpretations of Minoan culture. He was entranced by the graceful Minoan world, populated by elaborately-dressed and powerful looking women. He was also the first to suggest that the Minoans seemed to be inordinately preoccupied with religion and this supposition has not lost its impetus over time. But, would this have been the case if the portrayals of the sexes had been reversed? If there had been an overwhelming majority of important males, both standing and seated, receiving respect and dominating crowd scenes whilst women had been relegated to a relatively minor role, would it have been deemed necessary to delve into the otherworld? To answer these questions is of course now academic. However, by keeping in mind the way we are anchored in our *lifeworlds* and how we are constantly interacting with and recreating our surroundings and expectations, can make us conscious on some level, of the process and how it can be counteracted. In other words by recognising our subjectivity we can maybe hope for more objectivity.

Women in the Mycenaean world seem to have had a more limited playing field: from LM II onwards fewer women were depicted in indisputably prominent positions and artistic motifs previously connected to women (and possibly their power) disappeared. Mycenaean men gained more wall space and used it to act out more traditional “manly” pursuits such as fighting and hunting. Again our preconceptions of what (or more likely in this case, who) belongs in the public and private spheres of society, could have played a part in their culture being designated as less religious and more preoccupied with secular pursuits. Under the religious veneer lurks a hidden (or subconscious) agenda fuelled by our cultural expectations. Minoan women, as women rather than goddesses, would not have corresponded with the expectations of their discoverer and subsequent researchers, nor to be fair, did they correlate well by analogy with the picture formed by other contemporary societies in the ancient world. But some judicious tweaking could restore the balance: if women were clearly not confined to the domestic arena, then they would have to be raised out of the mortal sphere altogether.

I realise that it is difficult to believe that the Minoans could have conducted their affairs in a way which seems very different from the other cultures with whom they were clearly in contact: a literal island of female domination does have an incredulous ring to it. However, it might not be such a bizarre idea. It is not too difficult to compare two cultures in the here-

and-now and imagine archaeologists in the future being baffled by how differently they treated women. How would it have been possible in a time when travel between these cultures would have taken only a few hours? It would not have been possible that these cultures weren't aware of each other and their different values, yet nonetheless they apparently chose to do it "their way". So, this "island" might have been a reality. Thus, if there is a possibility that much of the iconography which survives was not necessarily religious in the sense of being associated with divine beings, then the idea has to be entertained. I entertained it.

Even in Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures which appear to have been in the final analysis, male-dominated, women could still operate within the business world in a way that would not have been dreamed of in the later world of Greek antiquity. I have tried to make a case for placing Minoan women within the "profane" (in the modern sense of the word) context of commerce and leadership and to this end have emphasised their connection to the crocus flower and saffron. There seems to be very little doubt that women were associated with this plant and its products. However, the modern preoccupation with dividing the world up into two parts: the sacred and the profane might be clouding the issue. A person who controls a commodity or item of value might portray her or himself in the guise of a deity and might ultimately have come to be imbued with a whiff of immortality. This could easily have been a lesson learned from Near Eastern and Egyptian rulers where divinity might have been the ultimate tool of the spin-doctor.

Am I convinced by my own interpretations of the fresco in Xeste 3 and the Mochlos ring? Are these scenes really secular? Yes ... and no ... The point of the exercise has been more to explore how preconceptions about what is suitable for one sex or gender may have been influenced by and can influence all future interpretations of any given artefacts or depictions thereon. Our *dasein* or "being in the world" cannot but be reflected in our interpretations of any past civilisation. Consensus is built up and often never seriously questioned. Women and men are still seen as having their set tasks to which they are biologically suited. This automatically allows men more influence in the temporal sphere and seems to force any seemingly powerful females into the spiritual realm, where their power is removed from day-to-day operations. It could be summed up by saying "I am not saying it was like this, but rather that it may have been"

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